

## “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and particularly on the works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffmann” by Sir Walter Scott

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A LITERARY GOTHIC etext

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[60]

No source of romantic fiction, and no mode of exciting the feelings of interest which the authors in that description of literature desire to produce, seems more directly accessible than the love of the supernatural. It is common to all classes of mankind, and perhaps is to none so familiar as to those who assume a certain degree of scepticism on the subject; since the reader may have often observed in conversation, that the person who professes himself most incredulous on the subject of marvellous stories, often ends his remarks by indulging the company with some well-attested anecdote, which it is difficult or impossible to account for on the narrator's own principles of absolute scepticism. The belief itself, though easily capable of being pushed into superstition and absurdity, has its origin not only in the facts upon which our holy religion is founded, but upon the principles of our nature, which teach us that while we are probationers in this sublunary state, we are neighbours to, and encompassed by the shadowy world, of which our mental faculties are too obscure to comprehend the laws, our corporeal organs too coarse and gross to perceive the inhabitants.

All professors of the Christian Religion believe that there was a time when the Divine Power showed itself more visibly on earth than in these our latter days; controlling and suspending, for its own purposes, the ordinary laws of the universe; and the Roman Catholic Church, at least, holds it as an article of faith, that miracles descend to the present time. Without entering into that controversy, it is enough that a firm belief in the great truths of our religion has induced wise and good men, even in Pro-[61]testant countries, to subscribe to Dr. Johnson's doubts respecting supernatural appearances.

“That the dead are seen no more, said Imlac, I will not undertake to maintain against the concurrent and unvaried testimony of all ages, and of all nations. There is no people, rude or learned, among whom apparitions of the dead are not related and believed. This opinion, which perhaps prevails as far as human nature is diffused, could become universal only by its truth; those that never heard of one another could not have agreed in a tale which nothing but experience can make credible. That it is doubted by single cavillers, can very little weaken the general evidence; and some who deny it with their tongues, confess it by their fears.”<sup>1</sup>

Upon such principles as these there lingers in the breasts even of philosophers, a reluctance to decide dogmatically upon a point where they do not and cannot possess any, save negative, evidence. Yet this inclination to believe in the marvellous gradually becomes weaker. Men cannot but remark that (since the scriptural miracles have ceased,) the belief in prodigies and supernatural events has gradually declined in proportion to the advancement of human knowledge; and that since the age has become enlightened, the occurrence of tolerably well attested anecdotes of the supernatural character are so few, as to render it more probable that the witnesses have laboured under some strange and temporary delusion, rather than that the

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<sup>1</sup> From Samuel Johnson's Oriental tale *Rasselas* (1759), Chapter 31.

laws of nature have been altered or suspended. At this point of human knowledge, the marvellous is so much identified with fabulous, as to be considered generally as belonging to the same class.

It is not so in early history, which is full of supernatural incidents; and although we now use the word *romance* as synonymous with fictitious composition, yet as it originally only meant a poem, or prose work contained in the Romance language, there is little doubt that the doughty chivalry who listened to the songs of the minstrel, "held each strange tale devoutly true,"<sup>2</sup> and that the feats of knighthood which he recounted, mingled with tales of magic and supernatural interference, were esteemed as veracious as the legends of the monks, to which they bore a strong resemblance. This period of society, however, must have long past before the Romancer began to select and arrange with care, the nature of the materials out of which he constructed his story. It was not when society, however differing in degree and station, was levelled and confounded by one dark cloud of ignorance, involving the noble as well as the mean, that it need be scrupulously considered to what class of persons the author addressed himself, or with what species of decoration he ornamented his story. "Homo was [62] then a common name for all men," and all were equally pleased with the same style of composition. this, however, was gradually altered. As the knowledge to which we have before alluded made more general progress, it became impossible to detain the attention of the better instructed class by the simple and gross fables to which the present generation would only listen in childhood, though they had been held in honour by their fathers during youth, manhood, and old age.

It was also discovered that the supernatural in fictitious composition requires to be engaged with considerable delicacy, as criticism begins to be more on the alert. The interest which it excites is indeed a powerful spring; but it is one which is peculiarly subject to be exhausted by coarse handling and repeated pressure. It is also of a character which it is extremely difficult to sustain, and of which a very small proportion may be said to be better than the whole. The marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified. If once, like Macbeth, we "sup full with horrors,"<sup>3</sup> our taste for the banquet is ended, and the thrill of terror with which we hear or read of a night-shriek, becomes lost in that sated indifference with which the tyrant came at length to listen to the most deep catastrophes that could affect his house. The incidents of a supernatural character are usually those of a dark and undefinable nature, such as arise in the mind of the Lady in the Mask of Comus, --incidents to which our fears attach more consequence, as we cannot exactly tell what it is we behold, or what is to be apprehended from it:—

"A thousand fantasies

Begin to throng into my memory,  
Of calling shapes and beck'ning shadows dire,  
And aery tongues that syllable men's names  
On sands, and shores, and desert wildernesses."<sup>4</sup>

Burke observes upon obscurity, that it is necessary to make any thing terrible, and notices "how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings."<sup>5</sup> He represents also, that no person "seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton. His description of Death, in the second book; is admirably studied; it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring, he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors. [63]

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<sup>2</sup> From William Collins' "Ode to Fear."

<sup>3</sup> From Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which Macbeth says "I have almost forgot the taste of fears; / The time has been, my senses would have cool'd / To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair / Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir / As life were in't: I have supp'd full with horrors; / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts / Cannot once start me" (V.v.9-15).

<sup>4</sup> From John Milton's *Comus* (1634), 205-209.

<sup>5</sup> From Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), Part 2, sec. 3. Burke argues that obscurity is essential to terror: "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary." The discussion of Milton is from the same section.

‘The other shape,—  
If shape it might be called, which shape had none  
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb:  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,—  
For each seemed either; black he stood as night;  
Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell;  
And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head  
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.’

In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible and sublime to the last degree.”<sup>6</sup>

The only quotation worthy to be mentioned along with the passage we have just taken down, is the well-known apparition introduced with circumstances of terrific obscurity in the book of Job:

“Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ears received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes; there was silence, and I heard a voice.”<sup>7</sup>

From these sublime and decisive authorities, it is evident that the exhibition of supernatural appearances in fictitious narrative ought to be rare, brief, indistinct, and such as may become a being to us so incomprehensible, and so different from ourselves, of whom we cannot justly conjecture whence he comes, or for what purpose, and of whose attributes we can have no regular or distinct perception. Hence it usually happens, that the first touch of the supernatural is always the most effective, and is rather weakened and defaced, than strengthened, by the subsequent recurrence of similar incident. Even in *Hamlet*, the second entrance of the ghost is not nearly so impressive as the first; and in many romances to which we could refer, the supernatural being forfeits all claim both to our terror and veneration, by condescending to appear too often; to mingle too much in the events of the story, and above all, to become loquacious, or, as it is familiarly called, *chatty*. We have, indeed, great doubts whether an author acts wisely in permitting his goblin to speak at all, if at the same time he renders him subject to human sight. Shakspeare [*sic*], indeed, has contrived to put such language in the mouth of the buried majesty of Denmark as befits a supernatural being, and is by the style distinctly different from that of the living persons in the drama. In another passage he has had the boldness to intimate, by two expressions of similar force, in what manner and with what tone supernatural beings would find utterance:

“And the sheeted dead  
Did *squeak* and *gibber* in the Roman streets.”<sup>8</sup>

[64] But the attempt in which the genius of Shakespeare has succeeded would probably have been ridiculous in any meaner hand; and hence it is, that, in many of our modern tales of terror, our feelings of fear have, long before the conclusion, given way under the influence of that familiarity which begets contempt.

A sense that the effect of the supernatural in its more obvious application is easily exhausted, has occasioned the efforts of modern authors to cut new walks and avenues through the enchanted wood, and to revive, if possible, by some means or other, the fading impression of its horrors.

The most obvious and inartificial mode of attaining this end is, by adding to, and exaggerating the supernatural incidents of the tale. But far from increasing its effect, the principles which we have laid down, incline us to consider the impression as usually weakened by exaggerated and laborious description. Elegance is in such cases thrown away, and the accumulation of superlatives, with which the narrative is encumbered, renders it tedious, or perhaps ludicrous, instead of becoming impressive or grand.

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<sup>6</sup> Scott is quoting Burke quoting Milton; Burke’s passage includes lines from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 666-673.

<sup>7</sup> Job 4.12-16.

<sup>8</sup> From Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act I, scene 1, 115-116.

There is indeed one style of composition, of which the supernatural forms an appropriate part, which applies itself rather to the fancy than to the imagination, and aims more at amusing than at affecting or interesting the reader. To this species of composition belong the eastern tales,<sup>9</sup> which contribute so much to the amusement of our youth, and which are recollected, if not re-perused, with so much pleasure in our more advanced life. There are but few readers of any imagination who have not at one time or other in their life sympathized with the poet Collins,<sup>10</sup> “who,” says Dr. Johnson, “was eminently delighted with those flights of imagination, which pass the bounds of nature, and to which the mind is reconciled only by a passive acquiescence in popular traditions. He loved fairies, genii, giants, and monsters; he delighted to rove through the meadows of enchantment, to gaze on the magnificence of golden palaces, to repose by the waterfalls of Elysian gardens.” It is chiefly the young and the indolent who love to be soothed by works of this character, which require little attention in the perusal. In our riper age we remember them as we do the joys of our infancy, rather because we loved them once, than that they still continue to afford us amusement. The extravagance of fiction loses its charms for our riper judgment; and notwithstanding that these wild fictions contain much that is beautiful and full of fancy, yet still, unconnected as they are with each other, and conveying no result to the understanding, we pass them by as the championess Britomart rode along the rich strand.

Which as she overwent,  
 She saw bestrewed all with rich array  
 Of pearls and precious stones of great assay,  
 [65] And all the gravel mixt with golden ore:  
 Whereat she wondered much, but would not stay  
 For gold, or pearls, or precious stones, one hour;  
 But them despised all, for all was in her power.<sup>11</sup>

With this class of supernatural composition may be ranked, though inferior in interest, what the French call *Contes des Fées*; meaning, by that title, to distinguish them from the ordinary popular tales of fairy folks which are current in most countries. The *Conte des Fées* is itself a very different composition, and the fairies engaged are of a separate class from those whose amusement is to dance round the mushroom in the moonlight, and mislead the belated peasant. The French *Fée* more nearly resembles the Peri of Eastern, or the Fata of Italian poetry.<sup>12</sup> She is a superior being, having the nature of an elementary spirit, and possessing magical powers enabling her, to a considerable extent, to work either good or evil. But whatever merit this species of writing may have attained in some dexterous hands, it has, under the management of others, become one of the most absurd, flat, and insipid possible. Out of the whole *Cabinet des Fées*, when we get beyond our old acquaintances of the nursery, we can hardly select five volumes, from nearly fifty, with any probability of receiving pleasure from them.

It often happens that, when any particular style becomes somewhat antiquated and obsolete, some caricature, or satirical imitation of it, gives rise to a new species of composition. Thus the English Opera arose from the parody upon the Italian stage, designed by Gay, in the *Beggar's Opera*.<sup>13</sup> In like manner, when the public had been inundated, *ad nauseam*, with Arabian tales, Persian tales, Turkish tales, Mogul tales<sup>14</sup>, and

<sup>9</sup> What are now commonly referred to as “Oriental tales,” such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786).

<sup>10</sup> William Collins (1721-1759); Collins is regarded as one of the “Graveyard School” poets, and his *Persian Eclogues* is in the “eastern” mode Scott is discussing. Collins was a favorite poet of Ann Radcliffe.

<sup>11</sup> From Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), Book III, canto 4; Britomart, the chaste warrior hero of Book III, is noted for her calm and heroic martial character as well as her unwavering commitment to her future husband, Arthegall.

<sup>12</sup> A Peri is a superhuman being, typically represented as good, from Persian mythology; a “Fata” is a “fay” or woman of supernatural power in Italian folklore.

<sup>13</sup> John Gay’s *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is a satiric “opera” (actually a play with a lot of songs) poking fun at the conventions of Italian opera of the day. It was the inspiration for Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *The Three-Penny Opera* (1928), which gives us, via adaptation and translation, the jazz classic “Mack the Knife,” the roguish highwayman from Gay’s work having become a roguish hitman.

<sup>14</sup> Mogul, used generally as here, refers to any aspect of the Mogul Dynasty, which ruled parts of the Indian subcontinent, from current-day northern India into what is now southern China, from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

legends of every nation east of the Bosphorus,<sup>15</sup> and were equally annoyed by the increasing publication of all sorts of fairy tales, —Count Anthony Hamilton,<sup>16</sup> like a second Cervantes, came forth with his satirical tales, destined to overturn the empire of Dives, of Genii, of Peris, *et hoc genus omne*.<sup>17</sup>

Something too licentious for a more refined age, the Tales of Count Hamilton subsist as a beautiful illustration, showing that literary subjects, as well as the fields of the husbandman, may, when they seem most worn out and effete, be renewed and again brought into successful cultivation by a new course of management. The wit of Count Hamilton, like manure applied to an exhausted field, rendered the eastern tales more piquant, if not more edifying, than it was before. Much was written in imitation of Count Hamilton's style; and it was followed by Voltaire<sup>18</sup> in particular, who in this way rendered the supernatural romance one of the most apt vehicles for circulating his satire. This, [66] therefore, may be termed the comic side of the supernatural, in which the author plainly declares his purpose to turn into jest the miracles which he relates, and aspires to awaken ludicrous sensations without affecting the fancy—far less exciting the passions of the reader. By this species of delineation the reader will perceive that the supernatural style of writing is entirely travestied and held up to laughter, instead of being made the subject of respectful attention, or heard with at least that sort of imperfect excitement with which we listened to a marvellous tale of fairy-land. This species of satire—for it is often converted to satirical purposes—has never been more happily executed than by the French authors, although Wieland,<sup>19</sup> and several other German writers, treading in the steps of Hamilton, have added the grace of poetry to the wit and to the wonders with which they have adorned this species of composition. Oberon, in particular, has been identified with our literature by the excellent translation of Mr. Sotheby, and is nearly as well known in England as in Germany. It would, however, carry us far too wide from our present purpose, were we to consider the comi-heroic poetry which belongs to this class, and which includes the well-known works of Pulci, Berni – perhaps, in a certain degree, of Ariosto himself, who, in some passages at least, lifts his knightly vizor so far as to give a momentary glimpse of the smile which mantles upon his countenance.

One general glance at the geography of this most pleasing “Londe of Faery,”<sup>20</sup> leads us into another province, rough as it may seem and uncultivated, but which, perhaps, on that very account, has some scenes abounding in interest. There are a species of antiquarians who, while others laboured to reunite and ornament highly the ancient traditions of their country, have made it their business, *antiquos accedere fontes*<sup>21</sup>, to visit the ancient springs and sources of those popular legends which, cherished by the grey and superstitious Elde, had been long forgotten in the higher circles, but are again brought forward and claim, like the old ballads of a country, a degree of interest even from their rugged simplicity. The *Deutsche Sagen* of the brothers Grimm,<sup>22</sup> is an admirable work of this kind; assembling, without any affectation either of ornamental diction or improved incident, the various traditions existing in different parts of Germany respecting popular superstitions and the events ascribed to supernatural agency. There are other works of the same kind, in the same language, collected with great care and apparent fidelity. Sometimes trite, sometimes tiresome, sometimes childish, the legends which these authors have collected with such indefatigable zeal form nevertheless a step in the history of the [67] human race;

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<sup>15</sup> The Bosphorus Strait connects the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara in present-day Turkey. It has long been regarded as the dividing line between Europe and Asia.

<sup>16</sup> Count Anthony Hamilton (1646? - 1720) was an Irish-born writer and courtier from a well-known Scottish family, and spent much of his life in France and England. Among his literary works is a collection of satiric fairy tales, intended, like Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel *Don Quixote*, to ridicule what was seen as a stale and *passé* literary mode.

<sup>17</sup> Latin for “and all [stories] of that type.”

<sup>18</sup> Voltaire: pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), French writer, satirist, and philosopher.

<sup>19</sup> Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), German poet and writer, well-known for works drawing on classical myth and folklore; one of his most famous works was the romantic epic poem *Oberon* (1780; translated 1798).

<sup>20</sup> Scott uses this term in one of his footnotes to his poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810).

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), this translates roughly to “the older ones approach the source.”

<sup>22</sup> These are the “Brothers Grimm,” best known for their “fairy tales,” the first edition of which was published in 1812. The *Deutsche Sagen* (*German Legends*) to which Scott refers were published in two volumes, in 1816 and 1818.

and, when compared with similar collections in other countries, seem to infer traces of a common descent which has placed one general stock of superstition within reach of the various tribes of mankind. What are we to think when we find the Jutt and the Fin<sup>23</sup> telling their children the same traditions which are to be found in the nurseries of the Spaniard and Italian; or when we recognize in our own instance the traditions of Ireland or Scotland as corresponding with those of Russia? Are we to suppose that their similarity arises from the limited nature of human invention, and that the same species of fiction occurs to the imaginations of different authors in remote countries as the same species of plants are found in different regions without the possibility of them having been propagated by transportation from the one to others? Or ought we, rather, to refer them to a common source, when mankind formed but the same great family, and suppose that as philologists trace through various dialects the broken fragments of one general language, so antiquaries may recognize in distant countries parts of what was once a common stock of tradition? We will not pause on this inquiry, nor observe more than generally that, in collecting these traditions, the industrious editors have been throwing light, not only on the history of their own country in particular, but on that of mankind in general. There is generally some truth mingled with the abundant falsehood, and still more abundant exaggeration of the oral legend; and it may be frequently and unexpectedly found to confirm or confute the meagre statement of some ancient chronicle. Often, too, the legend of the common people, by assigning peculiar features, localities, and specialities to the incidents which it holds in memory, gives life and spirit to the frigid and dry narrative which tells the fact alone, without the particulars which render it memorable or interesting.

It is, however, in another point of view, that we wish to consider those popular traditions in their collected state: namely, as a peculiar mode of exhibiting the marvellous and supernatural in composition. And here we must acknowledge, that he who peruses a large collection of stories of fiends, ghosts, and prodigies, in hopes of exciting in his mind that degree of shuddering interest approaching to fear, which is the most valuable triumph of the supernatural, is likely to be disappointed. A whole collection of ghost stories inclines us as little to fear as a jest book moves us to laughter. Many narratives, turning upon the same interest, are apt to exhaust it: as in a large collection of pictures an ordinary eye is so dazzled with the variety of brilliant or glowing colours as to become less able to distinguish the merit of those pieces which are possessed of any.

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<sup>23</sup> "Jutt" is an archaic term referring to a people of northern and northwest India; "Finn" is a reference to inhabitants of Finland.

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“... the attachment of the Germans to the mysterious has invented another species of composition, which, perhaps, could hardly have made its way in any other country or language. This may be called the FANTASTIC mode of writing,-- in which the most wild and unbounded license is given to an irregular fancy....” [72]

“We do not mean to say that the imagination of Hoffmann was either wicked or corrupt, but only that it was ill-regulated and had an undue tendency to the horrible and the distressing.” [81]

“...the exhibition of supernatural appearances in fictitious narrative ought to be rare, brief, indistinct, and

Re: Hoffmann’s “The Sand-man”: “It is impossible to subject tales of this nature to criticism. They are not the visions of a poetical mind, they have scarcely even the seeming authenticity which the hallucinations of lunacy convey to the patient; they are the feverish dreams of a light-headed patient....” [97]

“...we possess in a much greater degree the power of exciting in our minds what is fearful, melancholy, or horrible, than of commanding thoughts of a lively & pleasing character. The grotesque, also, has a natural alliance with the horrible; for that which is out of nature can be with difficulty reconciled to the beautiful.” [93]