

The Fantastic (1973)

* * * In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, or a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.

* * * The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. Nonetheless, most examples satisfy all three conditions.

How are these three characteristics to take their place within the model of the work as we have articulated it in the preceding chapter? The first condition refers us to the *verbal* aspect of the text, more precisely, to what are called "visions": the fantastic is a particular case of the more general category of the "ambiguous vision." The second condition is more complex: it is linked on the one hand to the *syntactical* aspect, insofar as it implies the existence of formal units which correspond to the characters' estimation of events in the narrative; we might call these units "reactions," as opposed to the "actions" which habitually constitute the argument of the narrative; on the other hand, this second condition refers to the *semantic* aspect, since we are concerned with a represented theme, that of perception and of its notation. Lastly, the third condition has a more general nature and transcends the division into aspects: here we are concerned with a choice between several modes (and levels) of reading.

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The fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not: he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.

The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre. * * *

Yet it would be wrong to claim that the fantastic can exist only in a part of the work, for here are certain texts which sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself. The book closed, the ambiguity persists. A remarkable example is supplied by Henry James' tale "The Turn of the Screw," which does not permit us to determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized

the implicit reader (and generally in the hero of the story). It is this reaction which we describe as "hesitation," and the texts which generate it, as fantastic. When we raise the question of themes, we put the "fantastic" reaction in parentheses, in order to be concerned solely with the nature of the events that provoke it. In other words, from this viewpoint, the distinction between the fantastic and the marvelous is no longer of interest, and we shall be concerned with works belonging to one genre or the other without differentiation. Nonetheless the text may emphasize the fantastic (i.e., the reaction) so strongly that we can no longer distinguish the supernatural which has provoked it: the reaction makes it impossible to grasp the action, instead of leading us back to it. Putting the fantastic in parentheses then becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible.

In other words: concerned as we are here with the preception of an object, we may insist as much upon the preception as upon the object. But if the insistence on the perception is too strong, we no longer perceive the object itself.

The story of the young children (indefinite number and age) left to the care of servants in an old country house through the death, presumably, of parents. The servants, wicked and depraved, corrupt and deprave the children; the children are bad, full of evil, to a sinister degree. The servants die (the story vague about the way of it) and their apparitions, figures, return to haunt the house and the children, to whom they seem to beckon, whom they invite and solicit, from across dangerous places, the deep ditch of a sunk fence, etc.—so that the children may destroy themselves, lose themselves, by responding, by getting into their power. So long as the children are kept from them, they are not lost; but they try and try, these evil presences, to get hold of them. It is a question of the children 'coming over to where they are'.² JAMES C

Indeed if the artistic value of such an experiment be measured by the intellectual echoes it may again, long after, set in motion, the case would make in favour of this little firm fantasy—which I seem to see draw behind it today a train of associations. I ought doubtless to blush for thus confessing them so numerous that I can but pick among them for reference. JAMES

was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess," he quietly said. "She was t

little more light. "Who was it she was in love with?"

"The story will tell," I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh I can't wait for the story!"

"The story *won't* tell," said Douglas, "not in any literal vulgar way."

cropped up in another place. "What was the lady who was here before?"

"The last governess? She was also young and pretty - almost as young and almost as pretty, Miss, even as you."

"Ah then I hope her youth and her beauty helped her!" I recollect throwing off. "He seems to like us young and pretty!"

"Oh he *did*," Mrs. Grose assented: "it was the way he liked every one!" She had no sooner spoken indeed than she caught herself up. "I mean that's *his* way - the master's."

I was struck. "But of whom did you speak first?"

She looked blank, but she coloured. "Why of *him*."

"Of the master?"

"Of who else?"

There was so obviously no one else that the next moment I had lost my impression of her having accidentally said more than she meant; and I merely asked what I wanted to know.

It was plump, one afternoon, in the middle of my very hour: the children were tucked away and I had come out for my stroll. One of the thoughts that, as I don't in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that - I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. That was exactly present to me - by which I mean the face was - when, on the first of these occasions, at the end of a long June day, I stopped short on emerging from one of the plantations and coming into view of the house. What arrested me on the spot - and with a shock much greater than any vision had allowed for - was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there! - but high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower to which, on that first morning, little Flora had conducted me. This tower was one of a pair - square incongruous crenellated structures - that were distinguished, for some reason, though I could see little difference, as the new and the old. They flanked opposite ends of the house and were probably architectural absurdities, redeemed in a measure indeed by not being wholly disengaged nor of a height too pretentious, dating, in their gingerbread antiquity, from a romantic revival that was already a respectable past. I admired them, had fancies about them, for we could all profit in a degree, especially when they loomed through the dusk, by the grandeur of their actual battlements; yet it was not at such an elevation that the figure I had so often invoked seemed most in place.

It produced in me, this figure, in the clear twilight, I remember, two distinct gasps of emotion, which were, sharply, the shock of my first and that of my second surprise. My second was a violent perception of the mistake of my first: the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed. There came to me thus a bewilderment of vision of which, after these years, there is no living view that I can hope to give. An unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred; and the figure that faced me was - a few more seconds assured me - as little any one else I knew as it was the image that had been in my mind. I had not seen it in Harley Street - I had not seen it anywhere. The place moreover, in the strangest way in the

going down to the terrace on which he stood, he came close to the glass, yet the effect of this he did not view strangely, just to show me how intense the feeling had become. He remained but a few seconds - long enough to convince me he also saw and recognised; but it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always. Something, however, happened this time that had not happened before: his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room

was as deep and hard as then, but it quitted me for a moment during which I could still watch it, see it fix successively several other things. On the spot there came to me the added shock a certitude that it was not for me he had come. He had come for some one else.

"He has no hat." Then seeing in her face that she already, this, with a deeper dismay, found a touch of picture, I quickly added stroke to stroke. "He has red hair, very red, close-curling and a pale face, long in shape, with straight good features and little rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are somehow darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal. His eyes are sharp, strange - awfully; but I only know clearly that they're rather small and very fixed. His mouth's wide, and his lips are thin, and except for his little whiskers he's quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor."

"An actor!" It was impossible to resemble one less, at least, than Mrs. Grose at that moment.

"I've never seen one, but so I suppose them. He's tall, active, erect," I continued, "but never - no, never! - a gentleman."

My companion's face had blanched as I went on, her round eyes started and her mild mouth gaped. "A gentleman?" she gasped, confounded, stupefied: "a gentleman *he*?"

"You know him then?"

She visibly tried to hold herself. "But he is handsome?"

I saw the way to help her. "Remarkably!"

"And dressed -?"

"In somebody's clothes. They're smart, but they're not his own."

She broke into a breathless affirmative groan. "They're the master's!"

I caught it up. "You *do* know him?"

She faltered but a second. "Quint!" she cried.

"Quint?"

"Peter Quint - his own man, his valet, when he was here!"

"Not a word - that's the horror. She kept it to herself! The child of eight, *that* child!" Unutterable still for me was the stupefaction of it.

Mrs. Grose of course could only gape the wider. "Then how do you know?"

"I was there - I saw with my eyes; saw she was perfectly aware."

"Do you mean aware of *him*?"

"No - of *her*." I was conscious as I spoke that I looked prodigious things, for I got the slow reflexion of them in my companion's face. "Another person - this time; but a figure quite as unmistakable horror and evil: a woman in black, pale and dreadful - with such an air also, and such a face! - on the other side of the lake. I was there with the child - quiet for an hour; and in the midst of it she came."

"Came how - from where?"

"From where they come from! She just appeared and stood there - but not so near."

"And without coming nearer?"

"Oh for the effect and the feeling she might have been close as you!"

My friend, with an odd impulse, fell back a step. "Was it some one you've never seen?"

"Never. But some one the child has. Some one *you* have." Then to show how I had thought it all out: "My predecessor - the one who died."

"Miss Jessel?"

"Miss Jessel. You don't believe me?" I pressed.

She turned right and left in her distress. "How can you be sure?" This drew from me, in the state of my nerves, a flash of

After a little she turned round. "The person was in black, you say?"

"In mourning - rather poor, almost shabby. But - yes - with extraordinary beauty." I now recognised to what I had at last, stroke by stroke, brought the victim of my confidence, for she quite visibly weighed this. "Oh handsome - very, very," I insisted; "wonderfully handsome. But infamous."

She slowly came back to me. "Miss Jessel - *was* infamous." She once more took my hand in both her own, holding it as tight as if to fortify me against the increase of alarm I might draw from this disclosure. "They were both infamous," she finally said.

So for a little we faced it once more together, and I found absolutely a degree of help in seeing it now so straight. "I appreciate," I said, "the great decency of your not having hitherto spoken; but the time has certainly come to give me the whole thing." She appeared to assent to this, but still only in silence; seeing which I went on: "I must have it now. Of what did she die? Come, there was something between them."

"There was everything."

"In spite of the difference -?"

"Oh of their rank, their condition" - she brought it woefully out. "*She* was a lady."

I turned it over; I again saw. "Yes - she was a lady."

"And he so dreadfully below," said Mrs. Grose.

I felt that I doubtless needn't press too hard, in such company, on the place of a servant in the scale; but there was nothing to prevent an acceptance of my companion's own measure of my predecessor's abasement. There was a way to deal with that, and I dealt; the more readily for my full vision - on the evidence - of our employer's late clever good-looking "own" man; impudent, assured, spoiled, depraved. "The fellow was a bound."

Mrs. Grose considered as if it were perhaps a little a case for a sense of shades. "I've never seen one like him. He did what he wished."

"With *her*?"

"With them all."

beautiful that shone out of the blue of her own. "You were looking for me out of the window?" I said. "You thought I might be walking in the grounds?"

"Well, you know, I thought some one was" - she never blanched as she smiled out that at me.

Oh how I looked at her now! "And did you see any one?"

"Ah *no*," she returned almost (with the full privilege of childish inconsequence) resentfully, though with a long sweetness in her little drawl of the negative.

At that moment, in the state of my nerves, I absolutely believed she lied; and if I once more closed my eyes it was

"Think me - for a change - *bad*!" I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry. He had given exactly the account of himself that permitted least my going behind it, and it was only with the effect of confirming my acceptance of it that, as I presently glanced about the room, I could say -

"Then you didn't undress at all?"

He fairly glittered in the gloom. "Not at all. I sat up and read."

"And when did you go down?"

"At midnight. When I'm bad I *am* bad!"

"I see, I see - it's charming. But how could you be sure I should know it?"

"Oh I arranged that with Flora." His answers rang out with a readiness! "She was to get up and look out."

"Which is what she did do." It was I who fell into the trap!

"So she disturbed you, and, to see what she was looking at, you also looked - you saw."

"While you," I concurred, "caught your death in the night air!"

He literally bloomed so from this exploit that he could afford radiantly to assent. "How otherwise should I have been bad enough?" he asked. Then, after another embrace, the incident and our interview closed on my recognition of all the reserves of goodness that, for his joke, he had been able to draw upon.

while there pierced through my sense of ruin a private triumph, into breathless reassurance.

"She isn't there, little lady, and nobody's there - and you never see nothing, my sweet! How can poor Miss Jessel - when poor Miss Jessel's dead and buried? We know, don't we, love?" - and she appealed, blundering in, to the child. "It's all a mere mistake and a worry and a joke - and we'll go home as fast as we can!"