

METAFICTION

so painful to return to that Vonnegut compares his fate to that of Lot's wife in the Old Testament, who showed her human nature by looking back upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah but was punished by being turned into a pillar of salt.

I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.

This one is a failure, and it had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.

In fact, so far from being a failure, *Slaughterhouse Five* is Vonnegut's masterpiece, and one of the most memorable novels of the postwar period in English.

47 The Uncanny

The contest was brief. I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscoting, and thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom.

At that instant some person tried the latch of the door. I hastened to prevent an intrusion, and then immediately returned to my dying antagonist. But what human language can adequately portray that astonishment, that horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view? The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror, – so at first it seemed to me in my confusion – now stood where none had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait.

Thus it appeared, I say, but was not. It was my antagonist – it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. His mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor. Not a thread in all his raiment – not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, *mine own!*

EDGAR ALLAN POE "William Wilson" (1839)

THE FRENCH (originally Bulgarian) structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov has proposed that tales of the supernatural divide into three categories: the marvellous, in which no rational explanation of the supernatural phenomena is possible; the uncanny, in which it is; and the fantastic, in which the narrative hesitates undecidedly between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

An example of the fantastic in this sense is Henry James's famous ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*. A young woman is appointed governess to two young orphaned children in an isolated country house, and sees figures who apparently resemble a former governess and the villainous manservant who seduced her, both now dead. She is convinced that these evil spirits have a hold over the young children in her care, from which she seeks to free them. In the climax she struggles with the male ghost for the possession of Miles's soul, and the boy dies: "his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped." The story (which is narrated by the governess) can be, and has been, read in two different ways, corresponding to Todorov's "marvellous" and "uncanny": either the ghosts are "real", and the governess is involved in a heroic struggle against supernatural evil, or they are projections of her own neuroses and sexual hang-ups, with which she frightens the little boy in her charge literally to death. Critics have vainly tried to prove the correctness of one or other of these readings. The point of the story is that everything in it is capable of a double interpretation, thus rendering it impervious to the reader's scepticism.

Todorov's typology is a useful provocation to thought on the subject, though his nomenclature (*le merveilleux, l'étrange, le fantastique*) is confusing when translated into English, in which "the fantastic" is usually in unambiguous opposition to "the real", and "the uncanny" seems a more appropriate term with which to characterize a story like *The Turn of the Screw*. One can also quibble about its application. Todorov himself is obliged to concede that there are borderline works which must be categorized as "fantastic-uncanny" or "fantastic-marvellous". Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" is such a work. Though Todorov reads it as an allegory or parable of an uneasy conscience, therefore "uncanny" in his own

terms, it contains that element of ambiguity which he sees as essential to the fantastic.

"William Wilson" is a *Doppelgänger* story. The eponymous narrator, who admits his own depravity at the outset, describes his first boarding-school as a quaint old building in which "it was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be" (the pun is surely intended). There he had a rival who bore the same name, was admitted to the school on the same day, had the same birthday, and bore a close physical resemblance to the narrator, which he exploited by satirically mimicking the latter's behaviour. The only respect in which this double differs from the narrator is in being unable to speak above a whisper.

Wilson graduates to Eton, and then Oxford, plunging deeper and deeper into dissipation. Whenever he commits some particularly heinous act, a man invariably turns up dressed in identical clothes, concealing his face, but hissing "William Wilson" in an unmistakable whisper. Exposed by his double for cheating at cards, Wilson flees abroad, but everywhere he is pursued by the *Doppelgänger*. "Again and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, I would demand the questions 'Who is he? — whence came he? — and what are his objects?'" In Venice, Wilson is just about to keep an adulterous assignation when he feels "a light hand placed upon my shoulder, and that ever-remembered, low, damnable *whisper* within my ear." Beside himself with rage, Wilson attacks his tormentor with his sword.

Obviously one can explain the double as Wilson's hallucinatory externalization of his own conscience or better self, and there are several clues to this effect in the text. For example, Wilson says that his schoolboy double had a "moral sense . . . far keener than my own," and nobody but himself seems to be struck by the physical resemblance between them. But the story would not have its haunting and suggestive power if it did not invest the uncanny phenomenon with a credible concreteness. The climax of the novel is particularly artful in its ambiguous reference to the mirror. From a rational standpoint, we might hypothesize that, in a delirium of guilt and self-hatred, Wilson has mistaken his own mirror-image

THE UNCANNY

for his double, attacked it and mutilated himself in the process; but from Wilson's point of view it seems that the reverse has happened – what he at first takes to be a reflection of himself turns out to be the bleeding, dying figure of his double.

Classic tales of the uncanny invariably use “I” narrators, and imitate documentary forms of discourse like confessions, letters and depositions to make the events more credible. (Compare Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.) And these narrators tend to write in a conventionally “literary” style which in another context one might find tiresomely cliché-ridden: for example, “wild excitement”, “power of a multitude”, “sheer strength”, “brute ferocity” in the first paragraph of this extract. The whole Gothic-horror tradition to which Poe belongs, and to which he gave a powerful impetus, is replete with good-bad writing of this kind. The predictability of the rhetoric, its very lack of originality, guarantees the reliability of the narrator and makes his uncanny experience more believable.

48 Narrative Structure

THE HAND

I smacked my little boy. My anger was powerful. Like justice. Then I discovered no feeling in the hand. I said, “Listen, I want to explain the complexities to you.” I spoke with seriousness and care, particularly of fathers. He asked, when I finished, if I wanted him to forgive me. I said yes. He said no. Like trumps.

ALL RIGHT

“I don't mind variations,” she said, “but this feels wrong.” I said, “It feels all right to me.” She said, “To you, wrong is right.” I said, “I didn't say right, I said all right.” “Big difference,” she said. I said, “Yes, I'm critical. My mind never stops. To me almost everything is always wrong. My standard is pleasure. To me, this is all right.” She said, “To me it stinks.” I said, “What do you like?” She said, “Like I don't like. I'm not interested in being superior to my sensations. I won't live long enough for all right.”

MA

I said, “Ma, do you know what happened?” She said, “Oh, my God.”

LEONARD MICHAELS *I Would Have Saved Them
If I Could* (1975)