from beyond the doorway at the top of the stairs, belong only to a helpless dummy who now feels warm drops of blood sliding down his lacquered cheeks. For the Ticket Man has been left—alone and alive—in the shadows of an abandoned loft. And his eyes are rolling like mad marbles.

PROFESSOR NOBODY’S LITTLE LECTURES ON SUPERNATURAL HORROR

THE EYES THAT NEVER BLINK

Mist on a lake, fog in thick woods, a golden light shining on wet stones—such sights make it all very easy. Something lives in the lake, rustles through the woods, inhabits the stones or the earth beneath them. Whatever it may be, this something lies just out of sight, but not out of vision for the eyes that never blink. In the right surroundings our entire being is made of eyes that dilate to witness the haunting of the universe. But really, do the right surroundings have to be so obvious in their spectral atmosphere?

Take a cramped waiting room, for instance. Everything there seems so well-anchored in normalcy. Others around you talk ever so quietly; the old clock on the wall is sweeping aside the seconds with its thin red finger; the window blinds deliver slices of light from the outside world and shuffle them with shadows. Yet at any time and in any place, our bunkers of banality may begin to rumble. You see, even in a stronghold of our fellow beings we may be subject to abnormal fears that would land us in an asylum if we voiced them to another. Did we just feel some presence that does not belong among us? Do our eyes see something in a corner of that room in which we wait for we know not what?

Just a little doubt slipped into the mind, a little trickle of
suspicion in the bloodstream, and all those eyes of ours, one by one, open up to the world and see its horror. Then: no belief or body of laws will guard you; no friend, no counselor, no appointed personage will save you; no locked door will protect you; no private office will hide you. Not even the solar brilliance of a summer day will harbor you from horror. For horror eats the light and digests it into darkness.

ON MORBIDITY

Isolation, mental strain, emotional exertions, visionary infatuations, well-executed fevers, repudiations of well-being: only a few of the many exercises practiced by that specimen we shall call the “morbid man.” And our subject of supernatural horror is a vital part of his program. Retreating from a world of health and sanity, or at least one that daily invests in such commodities, the morbid man seeks the shadows behind the scenes of life. He backs himself into a corner alive with cool drafts and fragrant with centuries of must. It is in that corner that he builds a world of ruins out of the battered stones of his imagination, a rancid world rife with things smelling of the crypt.

But this world is not all a romantic sanctum for the dark in spirit. So let us condemn it for a moment, this deep-end of dejection. Though there is no name for what might be called the morbid man’s “sin,” it still seems in violation of some deeply ingrained morality. The morbid man does not appear to be doing himself or others any good. And while we all know that melancholic moping and lugubrious ruminating are quite palatable as side-dishes of existence, he has turned them into a house specialty! Ultimately, however, he may meet this charge of wrongdoing with a simple “What of it?”

Now, such a response assumes morbidity to be a certain class of vice, one to be pursued without apology, and one whose advantages and disadvantages must be enjoyed or endured outside the law. But as a sower of vice, if only in his own soul, the morbid man incurs the following censure: that he is a symptom or a cause of decay within both individual and collective spheres of being. And decay, like every other process of becoming, hurts everybody. “Good!” shouts the morbid man. “No good!” counters the crowd. Both positions betray dubious origins: one in resentment, the other in fear. And when the moral debate on this issue eventually reaches an impasse or becomes too tangled for truth, then psychological polemics can begin. Later on we will find other angles from which this problem may be attacked, enough to keep us occupied for the rest of our lives.

Meanwhile, the morbid man keeps putting his time on earth to no good use, until in the end—amidst mad winds, wan moonlight, and pasty specters—he uses his exactly like everyone else uses theirs: all up.

PESSIMISM AND SUPERNATURAL HORROR—LECTURE ONE

Madness, chaos, bone-deep mayhem, devastation of innumerable souls—while we scream and perish, History licks a finger and turns the page. Fiction, unable to compete with the world for vividness of pain and lasting effects of fear, compensates in its own way. How? By inventing more bizarre means to outrageous ends. Among these means, of course, is the supernatural. In transforming natural ordeals into supernatural ones, we find the strength to affirm and deny their horror simultaneously, to savor and suffer them at the same time.

So it is that supernatural horror is the product of a profoundly divided species of being. It is not the pastime of even our closest relations in the wholly natural world; we gained it as part of our gloomy inheritance, when we became what we are. Once awareness of the human predicament was achieved, we immediately took off in two directions, splitting ourselves down the middle. One half became dedicated to apologetics, even celebration, of our new toy of consciousness. The other half condemned and occasionally launched direct assaults on this “gift.” Supernatural horror was one of the ways we found that would allow us to live with our double selves. By its employ, we discovered how to take all the things that victimize us in our
natural lives and turn them into the very stuff of demonic delight in our fantasy lives. In story and song, we could entertain ourselves with the worst we could think of, overwriting real pains with ones that were unreal and harmless to our species. We can also do this trick without trespassing onto the property of supernatural horror, but then we risk running into miseries that are too close to home. While horror may make us squirm or quake, it will not make us cry at the pity of things. The vampire may symbolize our horror of both life and death, but none of us has ever been uprooted by a symbol. The zombie may conceptualize our sickness of the flesh and its appetites, but no one has ever been sickened to death by a concept. By means of supernatural horror we may pull our own strings of fate without collapsing—natural-born puppets whose lips are painted with our own blood.

PESSIMISM AND SUPERNATURAL HORROR—LECTURE TWO

Dead bodies that walk in the night, living bodies suddenly possessed by new owners and deadly aspirations, bodies without sensible form, and a body of unnatural laws in accordance with which tortures and executions are meted out—some examples of the logic of supernatural horror. It is a logic founded on fear, a logic whose sole principle states: “Existence equals nightmare.” Unless life is a dream, nothing makes sense. For as a reality, it is a rank failure. A few more examples: a trusting soul catches the night in a bad mood and must pay a dreadful price; another opens the wrong door, sees something he should not have, and suffers the consequences; still another walks down an unfamiliar street...and is lost forever.

That we all deserve punishment by horror is as mystifying as it is undeniable. To be an accomplice, however involuntarily, in a reasonless non-reality is cause enough for the harshest sentencing. But we have been trained so well to accept the “order” of an unreal world that we do not rebel against it. How could we? Where pain and pleasure form a corrupt alliance against us, paradise and hell are merely different divisions in the same monstrous bureaucracy. And between these two poles exists everything we know or can ever know. It is not even possible to imagine a utopia, earthly or otherwise, that can stand up under the mildest criticism. But one must take into account the shocking fact that we live on a world that spins. After considering this truth, nothing should come as a surprise.

Still, on rare occasions we do overcome hopelessness or vellity and make mutinous demands to live in a real world, one that is at least episodically ordered to our advantage. But perhaps it is only a demon of some kind that moves us to such idle insubordination, the more so to aggravate our condition in the unreal. After all, is it not wondrous that we are allowed to be both witnesses and victims of the sepulchral pomp of wasting tissue? And one thing we know is real: horror. It is so real, in fact, that we cannot be sure it could not exist without us. Yes, it needs our imaginations and our consciousness, but it does not ask or require our consent to use them. Indeed, horror operates with complete autonomy. Generating ontological havoc, it is mephitic foam upon which our lives merely float. And, all said, we must face up to it: horror is more real than we are.

SARDONIC HARMONY

Compassion for human hurt, a humble sense of our impermanence, an absolute valuation of justice—all of our so-called virtues only trouble us and serve to bolster, not assuage, horror. In addition, these qualities are our least vital, the least in line with life. More often than not, they stand in the way of one’s rise in the welter of this world, which found its pace long ago and has not deviated from it since. The putative affirmations of life—each of them based on the propaganda of Tomorrow: reproduction, revolution in its widest sense, piety in any form you can name—are only affirmations of our desires. And, in fact, these affirmations affirm nothing but our penchant for self-torment, our mania to preserve a demented innocence in the face of grue-some facts.
By means of supernatural horror we may evade, if momentarily, the horrific reprisals of affirmation. Every one of us, having been stolen from nonexistence, opens his eyes on the world and looks down the road at a few convulsions and a final obliteration. What a weird scenario. So why affirm anything, why make a pathetic virtue of a terrible necessity? We are destined to a fool's fate that deserves to be mocked. And since there is no one else around to do the mocking, we will take on the job. So let us indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions, let us delight in the Cosmic Macabre. At least we may send up a few bitter laughs into the cobwebbed corners of this crusty old universe.

Supernatural horror, in all its eerie constructions, enables a reader to taste treats inconsistent with his personal welfare. Admittedly, this is not a practice likely to find universal favor. True macabrists are as rare as poets and form a secret society by the bad-standing of their memberships elsewhere, some of their outside affiliations having been cancelled as early as birth. But those who have gotten a whiff of other worlds and sampled a cuisine marginal to stable existence will not be able to stay themselves from the uncanny feast of horrors that has been laid out for them. They will loiter in moonlight, eyeing the entranceways to cemeteries, waiting for some propitious moment to crash the gates and see what is inside.

Once and for all, let us speak the paradox aloud: “We have been force-fed for so long the shudders of a thousand graveyards that at last, seeking a macabre redemption, a salvation by horror, we willingly consume the terrors of the tomb... and find them to our liking.”

Years passed and no one in our town, no one I could name, allotted a single word to that great ruin which marred the evenness of the horizon. Nor was mention made of the gated patch of ground closer to the town’s edge. Even in days more remote, few things were said about these sites. Perhaps someone would propose tearing down the old asylum and razing the burial ground where no inmate had been interred for a generation or more; and perhaps a few others, swept along by the moment, would nod their heart’s assent. But the resolution always remained poorly formed, very soon losing its shape entirely, its impetus dying a gentle death in the gentle old streets of our town.

Then how can I explain that sudden turn of events, that overnight conversion which set our steps toward that hulking and decayed structure, trampling its burial ground along the way? In answer, I put forward the existence of a secret movement, one conducted in the souls of the town’s citizens, and in their dreams. Conceived thus, the mysterious conversion loses some of its mystery. One need only accept that we were all haunted by the same revenant, that certain images began to establish themselves deep within each of us and became part of our hidden lives. Finally, we resolved that we could no longer live as we had been.

When the idea of taking action first arose, the residents of the humble west end of town were the most zealous and impatient.