Abstract

*Visible Plots, Invisible Realms* exposes the spectral imagination at the heart of eighteenth-century English narrative. Since probability prohibited overt portrayal of God and ghosts in new, “realistic” genres such as newspapers, medical narratives, and novels, authors confined interactions with the spiritual world to characters’ minds through hints, dreams, and premonitions. Prevailing criticism tends to treat these signs either as a natural response to terrifying phenomena (and thus explainable by psychological analysis) or as evidence of distant providential benevolence, which is useful only for retrospective interpretation of events. Yet, major authors constructed plots that are actively guided by characters’ (mis-)apprehensions of spiritual communication. This equivocal but potent invisible agency was mirrored in the effect of verisimilar stories on audiences. A reader could not always tell whether fictional humans were “real,” but their virtual presence in society elicited powerful response, from correspondence with “Mr. Spectator” to public celebration of the wedding of novel-heroine Pamela. Apparitions were transformed into actors, while flesh-and-bone characters led a spectral life outside of their literary frames.

When the Gothic genre emerged, the vogue for spooky stories did not resurrect a long-dead supernaturalism but finally removed it from everyday life by turning ghost-belief into an aesthetic experiment rather than a possible encounter with the invisible realm. Yet, even this disenchantment was provisional. The later Gothic novel, and particularly the work of America’s first major novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, transformed the supernatural subtlety of earlier authors into a subversion of materialism,
spectralizing physical life itself. The rise of the novel and its related genres was as much about mystification as enlightenment: the teasing prospect of “reality” is an apparition of writing that haunts to this day.
Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the many teachers, colleagues, and friends who helped me develop this dissertation. My advisors and attendant spirits, Susan Wolfson, Sarah Rivett, and Claudia Johnson, gave unflagging support through years of work. Their critiques challenged and pushed my thinking, and Susan’s detailed commentary modelled an attention to language that always inspires, even (and perhaps especially) when my writing fails to replicate her concision and eloquence.

Like Crusoe’s barley, the seed of this project sprouted almost unawares. It was nurtured through courses tinged with the supernatural by Susan, by Sarah, by Claudia in partnership with Sophie Gee, and by our Notre Dame visitor, Margaret Doody. And before Princeton, Claudia Thomas Kairoff and Jessica Richard started me on the path of eighteenth-century studies during my MA program at Wake Forest. I am grateful for the wise and patient training.

At some point in the process of tracking spectral hints, I felt an impulse to explore digital methods of textual analysis, which has proved a pivotal turn in my life. I am thankful to the many friends who guided me in this process: Bill Gleason, Meredith Martin, John Logan, Jean Bauer, Ben Johnson, Natasha Ermolaev, Matthew Harrison, Meagan Wilson, Clifford Wulfman, and from Texas A&M, Laura Mandell.

I thank also my graduate school companions for their camaraderie and commiseration, from the eighteenth-century and romanticism colloquium and the genres colloquium, to Susan’s dissertation writing group, to the tight-knit community of the late
Butler apartments. Lyra Plumer Hostetter, in particular, has been a voice of unwavering support through the years.

My graduate career was supported by fellowships from the Jacob K. Javits program and Princeton University, for which I am very grateful. A Mellon Foundation Narratology Dissertation Seminar, led by Garrett Stewart at the University of Iowa in the summer of 2011, was a boon to my work on Defoe. The 2013 Bloomington Eighteenth-Century Studies Workshop, directed by Mary Favret with Richard Nash as witty respondent, was instrumental in helping me bridge Defoe and Richardson. Many thanks to these colleagues. I also presented parts of this dissertation in 2012 at a Princeton works-in-progress talk, and at the ASECS national meeting in San Antonio, in a paper titled “Can Narratives Enlighten? Crusoe’s Spirits in the Rise of the Novel.”

I cannot express adequate gratitude to my longsuffering family, who must have thought graduate school would never end. Most importantly, I thank my wife, Julie, with all my heart. She made it all possible and worthwhile.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments v

Introduction 1

1. Crusoevian Spirits and the Eighteenth-Century Novel 22

2. The Spirits of Melancholic Optimism 49

3. Richardson’s Muted Supernaturalism 88

4. Gothic Continuity, Gothic Disruption 123

Works Cited 154
Introduction

By James Boswell’s account, the talk on April 15, 1778 was typically Johnsonian in breadth of subject and emotion. In the heady company of booksellers, clergy, and other literary men and women, Dr. Johnson debated topics ranging from the relative degrees of happiness in heaven to Bernard Mandeville, vice, and pleasure (the “happiness of Heaven will be, that pleasure and virtue will be perfectly consistent”) before landing in more serious eschatological territory (Boswell’s 3: 292, 294). Boswell “expressed a horrour at the thought of death,” to which Johnson assented “with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air” (294). Uncertainty of salvation was one concern, but so too was the specter of mere annihilation. Any proof of another realm of being would have been a comfort. No surprise, then, that Boswell asked Johnson about John Wesley: “Pray, Sir, what has he made of his story of a ghost?” (297).

Wesley had bungled it. After his servant claimed to have witnessed an apparition, Rev. Wesley “did not take time enough to examine the girl.” His own brother Charles doubted the veracity of her claims, and so Johnson was “sorry that John did not take more pains to inquire into the evidence of it.” The problem was not the ghost story. Some intellectuals might have attributed Wesley’s credulity to Methodist enthusiasm, but Johnson criticized only his lack of empirical thoroughness. Anna Seward, the thirty-year-old poet from Johnson’s hometown of Litchfield, could hardly believe it. “With an incredulous smile,” she asked him: “What, Sir! [inquire] about a ghost?” Johnson “with solemn vehemence” replied: “Yes, Madam: this is a question which, after five thousand
years, is yet undecided; a question, whether in theology or philosophy, one of the most
important that can come before the human understanding” (297-98).

Oscillation between theology and philosophy haunts discourses of the
(supra)natural throughout the eighteenth century. At one extreme, theology had long
placed faith in a spiritual cosmology sketched out in scripture. At the other, natural
philosophy was asking for material evidence of things seen. John Locke, whose Essay
Concerning Human Understanding (1689) Johnson unsubtly invokes, had tried to resolve
the difference by arguing on the basis of sensuous epistemology that converse with
spiritual beings is impossible, even if one believes in them. Humans simply lack senses
for communicating with the invisible realm.\footnote{“[W]e have no certain information, so much as of the Existence of other Spirits, but by
revelation. Angels of all sorts are naturally beyond our discovery: And all those
intelligences, whereof ’tis likely there are more Orders than of corporeal Substances, are
Things, whereof our natural Faculties give us no certain account at all” (Locke 558).}
But this answer was unsatisfactory. Five
thousand years of eyewitness testimony is a tantalizing start to empirical demonstration,
if one could only provide enough corroborating proofs. With evidence so elusive,
however, the would-be believer was, like Johnson, “undecided” – stuck in limbo between
faith and demonstration.

Visible Plots, Invisible Realms explores this critical liminality as it developed in
and with eighteenth-century English fiction, and especially the nascent novel. Storytelling
was crucially intertwined with invisible realms for two reasons: narrative provided the
means of investigating supernatural phenomena, and, with increasing attention to
verisimilar details, fiction projected its own invisible realms filled with “realistic” but
invented persons and plots. In the seventeenth-century, strenuous treatises had been

\footnote{“[W]e have no certain information, so much as of the Existence of other Spirits, but by
revelation. Angels of all sorts are naturally beyond our discovery: And all those
intelligences, whereof ’tis likely there are more Orders than of corporeal Substances, are
Things, whereof our natural Faculties give us no certain account at all” (Locke 558).}
written to defend the evidence of a spiritual world in theological and scientific terms, but theory only hinted at occulted qualities. The palpable, lived experience of the supernatural could be expressed only in narrative form, through personal testimony. Stories demonstrated the potential for imagination to mediate gaps between the magical and the mundane, even without numinous characters.

Close examination of the phenomenology of the “yet undecided” is needed in a scholarly conversation that seems more comfortable at the extremes of certainty, a polarity visible in two major monographs from 2013. In *The Enlightenment and Why it Still Matters*, Anthony Pagden traces a line of progress, arguing that scientists and philosophers marched inexorably toward a disenchanted and happily cosmopolitan world in which theology was dethroned and God replaced “as a source of causal explanation,” despite the persistence of belief in a few intellectuals (96). John Fleming, on the other hand, identifies a sizable *Dark Side of the Enlightenment*, populated by *Wizards, Alchemists, and Spiritual Seekers* (his subtitle). In his reading, “the mainstream of European thought was not materialist but sacramental,” accommodating parallel material and invisible worlds whose collisions could produce vivid magic (112). Such collisions may have generated sensations—Valentine Greatrake’s miraculous healings were heralded by Andrew Marvell, Ralph Cudworth, and Benjamin Whitecote, for example (Fleming 69)—but miracles are by definition exceptional, and it is difficult to subject the exception to repeat experimentation. Many people can lay claim to subtler spooky experiences, however—the half-heard whisper, the crepuscular vision, an inexplicable sense of dread. What Pagden’s skepticism and Fleming’s thaumaturgy overlook is this
uncanny experience of the everyday, in which the mind wavers between skepticism and belief: the purview, in short, of the emerging novel.

The unprecedented focus of eighteenth-century narratives on the lives of common people and things derives much attention from the Pagden school of skepticism, which treats lingering references to the supernatural as epiphenomena of a decaying belief system. Providence, in this reading, is psychological crutch while ghosts are figments of imagination or deliberate fraud. The supernatural was ridiculed outright in *Tom Jones* and *Humphrey Clinker*, after all, and in many less farcical works it was absent. Yet, major authors ranging from Joseph Addison and Daniel Defoe to Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Edward Young, and medical doctor George Cheyne, regarded communication with spirits as a serious matter. Their interest may be difficult for modern readers to spot, especially since eighteenth-century authors wished to avoid being too explicit about an ambiguous topic, but rhetorical context illuminates spectral content.

Clergymen, philosophers, and physicians had long speculated about a haunted mediascape of the sensorium, and in the late seventeenth century, developments in demonology offered empirical ballast for their investigations. The science of spirits bloomed and survived, against heated opposition, into the Georgian era, attracting an eclectic group of scholars and theologians from multiple denominational backgrounds. The demonologists’ self-declared task was to compile “reliable” eyewitness testimony into apparition narratives to provide material evidence for invisible beings. With titles such as *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits. Fully Evinced by the Unquestionable Histories of Apparitions and Witchcrafts, Operations, Voices, &c.* (Richard Baxter, 1691) and *Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (Joseph Glanvill,
they signaled their desire to eliminate Johnsonian uncertainty and marry theological persuasion with philosophical proof.

Baxter demonstrates the elaborate networking and classifying that distinguished apparition science from mere marvelous tales of the uneducated. He positions his work as the most recent node in a web of scholarship ranging from continental jurists of the sixteenth century to his English and American contemporaries Joseph Glanville, Henry More, and Increase and Cotton Mather. These forebears had, in his judgment, provided “sufficient Proofs of invisible Powers”—stories both scriptural and local—but the “Multitudes bred up in Idleness and Sensuality” could not be counted on to search this historical record for themselves, so Baxter offers witnesses “near to them, both for Time and Place; of which, if they think their Souls worth so much Labour, they may enquire to Satisfaction” (1, 2).

With these testimonies in hand, Baxter details multiple recurring signs of invisible agency, including smells (25, 30, 31, 177), infliction of mysterious bodily injury (25, 64, 71, 104), unexplained fires (31, 55, 105, 137-46), the presence of foreign materials such as nails, pins, hair, and wood in vomit (74-81, 93-100), among others. Cataloguing of common traits set apparition narratives apart not only from folk talks, but also from “high” literary genres of sincere spiritual exploration. Milton may have believed his demons and angels are historical beings, but they operate in an impossibly distant, epic past. While allegorical tales such as Pilgrim’s Progress depict “real” dangers for Christians, the exterior fiction points to an interior, spiritual reality, not the verisimilar presence of an Apollyon in everyday life. Even fantastical travel narratives which feature

---

2 Subtitle of Saducismus Triumphatus.
modern-day protagonists are allegorical or satiric in nature: Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* (1666) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) both stage scenes of converse with famous departed authors, but only as literary conceit.

By contrast, Baxter, Glanvill, and company offer spirit stories in the here and now, which were supposed to be independently verifiable by contemporaries. The stories were not designed for entertainment, as E.J. Clery and G.A. Starr have noted, but the possibility for thrills divorced from apologetics continued to bedevil the genre.\(^3\) Since foolish credulity and lurid curiosity were dangers to serious supernaturalism, demonologists remained circumspect and judiciously skeptical about spiritual presence: “it is not my Business to mention all things that are strange and unusual, but such as prove the Operations of Spirits,” says Baxter (202). A sense of strict inquiry suffuses the project.

The results seemed, to the demonologists, an expert witness, but more important for eighteenth-century narrative was the ambiguous vocabulary that accompanied powerful proofs. Baxter’s declared intention only to “prove the operations of spirits” comes immediately after the testimony of one Mrs. Rich, who claimed that a serious-minded Mr. Tyro told her he heard a voice predicting he would die before his thirty-fifth birthday:

> You know, Madam, my Principles, and that I am no Enthusiast, and how cautious I am as to Revelations. But I am sure this was no Melancholy Fancy, but an auricular Voice. After I had a little recovered my self; I begg’d of God to discover to me, if this were from him, or a Delusion

\(^3\) See Clery 22-3, Starr, Introduction 19.
from Satan, but still the Impression remained, though I sought God by
Prayer most part of that Night. (200)

There are mysterious voices (melancholic “fancy”), and then there are mysterious voices
(“auricular”). Mr. Tyro’s might have been the former—as we shall see in chapter two,
melancholy was “the devil’s bath,” an opportunity for Satan to inject fancies or
“delusion” into the mind of the sufferer by manipulating bodily humors. Mr. Tyro’s sober
attempt to pray away the voice reveals no airy fancy, however. The “impression
remained,” suggesting a real mark imprinted on the mind—a voice communicating from
without—and history would vindicate the message: Mr. Tyro perished half a year before
his thirty-fifth birthday. Yet, despite the corroboration of detail, the assertion of caution,
the disclaimer of enthusiasm, Mr. Tyro’s story hangs on equivocation: the word
“impression,” which is pneumatic in a double sense, spiritual and under physical
pressure, as well as metaphorical. Such ambivalence in the diction of spiritual and
material causes would become a powerful narrative device in the eighteenth century.⁴

The evidentiary emphasis of apparition narratives, observes Michael McKeon, is a
generic strand of the developing novel, but he doesn’t engage the supernatural
suggestions in the language of agency that count as “evidence.”⁵ Novelists and other

---

⁴ Jayne Lewis expertly registers this ambivalence in the conception of “air both as a
material body fully explicable by the laws of nature and as the domain of apparitions and
angels” (Air’s 31).
⁵ In his account of the influence of apparition narrative upon novelistic discourse,
McKeon quotes Glanvill’s assertion “that only Satan benefits from the belief ‘that the
stories of Witches, Apparitions, and indeed every thing that brings tidings of another
world, are but melancholick Dreams, and pious Romances,’” and adds, the “great and
tireless argument of a supernatural reality is maintained within a succession of narrative
frames and articulated there by a complex pattern of circumstantial and authenticating
details—[…] all of which subserve the crucial claim to a natural existence; that is, to
historicity” (85).
storytellers did not just plunder the demonologists’ methods of examination while excising the spiritual content, nor did they uncritically adopt ghosts into their stories. They continued to blur the physical and the spiritual, crafting a material world which is continuous with the invisible. The realistic effect of creations Robinson Crusoe, Mr. Spectator, and Clarissa Harlowe gave credit to the supernatural powers involved in their critical decisions, and these fictions—phantasms of writing, all—had “real” presence in the world outside: readers took them to heart as actual social company. This double spectrality penetrated “the age of Enlightenment,” haunting verisimilar narrative long after widespread belief in “real” spirits subsided.

Johnson’s Undiscovered Spirits and the Storytellers’ Invisible Realms

Samuel Johnson shares the demonologists’ empirical fervor for spirit-hunting but registers difficulties in portraying the invisible realm mid century, even giving a possible explanation through his own example for why orthodox Christian authors would abandon the effort. The challenge is novelistic: for all the evidence collected by believers, we lack a solid verifiable case of haunting in recent memory. As Baxter had lamented, the freshness of eyewitness testimony expires with the eyewitness, and reliable examples were hard to find. Two weeks before Johnson excoriated Wesley’s under-examined ghost story, he had discussed the invisible realm in nearly identical terms, remarking, it “is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it” (Boswell, *Boswell’s 3: 230*). Philosophy and theology again emerge through the surrogates
“argument” and “belief,” and in Johnson’s staging of their opposition, a theory of narrative can be inferred. The novelist, as investigator of everyday life, must work with “instances” that have been verified by argument and demonstration rather than mere belief, making spirits an impossible subject of fictional exploration.⁶

Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759) clearly shows the principle. When Princess Nekayah’s attendant, Pekuah, refuses to enter the tombs of a pyramid because she is frightened at the possibility of meeting with ghosts, most of the other characters chide her credulity. The wise Imlac defends her, however, at least to a degree: “‘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. […] This opinion, which, perhaps, prevails as far as human nature is diffused, could become universal only by its truth’” (116). Nevertheless, Imlac can defend ghosts only in theory, by simply stating his conviction; no otherworldly being appears in *Rasselas*, not even as a hint in the imagination. From Johnson’s storytelling perspective, the witness would be too singular—as Imlac says, a poet “is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances” (43). Apparitions remain a matter of faith rather than fact, an experience of the individual rather than the species, something to be talked about, not demonstrated. The “universal truth” of their existing gives place to the verisimilar truth of their not appearing, a very Addisonian stance as we shall see in chapter two.

---

⁶ The importance of empirical verification of phenomena for Johnson is highlighted by the fact that the context of his discussion of ghosts is truth. In the sentence immediately preceding Johnson’s remark, Boswell writes, he “inculcated upon all his friends the importance of perpetual vigilance against the slightest degrees of falsehood” (229-30).
Johnson nevertheless continues to defend the supernatural and the search for evidence that could give it novelistic grounding. In 1762, he helped lead an expedition into the vault of St. John Church, Clerkenwell to test the claim that an aggrieved spirit, the famous Cock Lane ghost, would rap on the cover of her coffin at an appointed hour. Meeting with silence, Johnson could only conclude “that the child [to whom the ghost knocked] has some art of making or counterfeiting particular noises, and that there is no agency of any higher cause,” earning himself a large share of ridicule in the process (qtd. in Grant 72). As Charles Churchill writes in the purposely anticlimactic conclusion to the second book of his satirical *The Ghost*: “Silent all three [investigators] went in, about / All three turn’d silent, and came out” (807-808). Tellingly, the first Gothic novelist, Horace Walpole, described his own trip to Cock Lane as a kind of theatrical entertainment, and theatres revived Addison’s play *The Drummer* (1716), which drew uproarious response for its now-ironic line about ghosts appearing only in the country, never in London.8

Johnson’s disappointment and shame could have run deep. But sixteen years later, in 1778, he not only mentions ghosts twice within a two-week span (as we have seen), but also “expressed great indignation at the imposture of the Cock-lane Ghost, and related, with much satisfaction, how he had assisted in detecting the cheat, and had

---

7 Douglas Grant’s version of the third edition renders these lines in all caps. For more on the Cock Lane Ghost and the pointed satires against the credulity of Johnson and others, see Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost* (passim, but especially 78-109) and Clery 13-32.
8 Walpole wrote to George Martin of the Cock Lane ghost, “[t]he Archbishop[…] permits this farce to be played every night, and I Shall not be surprised if they perform in the great hall at Lambeth” (*Yale* 6). On the revival of *The Drummer*, see Clery: “The high point of each performance came when one of the characters stated, out of the assumptions of another era, ‘‘Tis the solitude of the Country that creates these Whimsies; there was never such a thing as a Ghost heard of at London’” (16).
published an account of it in the newspapers” (Boswell, *Boswell’s* 3: 268). Far from hiding away this failure of the invisible realm to manifest itself, Johnson boasts his part in exposing the sham, in adherence to truth.

In 1781, just three years before his death, Johnson maintained that apparitions must be real on account of the doctrine of the soul’s preservation to “the last day; the question simply is, whether departed spirits ever have the power of making themselves perceptible to us” (Boswell, *Boswell’s* 4: 94). Johnson is always cognizant of Lockean epistemology, which had denied the perceptibility, not the reality, of spirits. “A man who thinks he has seen an apparition,” continues Johnson, “can only be convinced himself; his authority will not convince another; and his conviction, if rational, must be founded on being told something which cannot be known but by supernatural means.” Replace “man” in this quotation with “novelist” (the investigator of the common man), and the inhospitality of realistic fiction to ghosts is clear. The novelist’s “authority will not convince another.” Subjective phenomena, no matter how well attested, cannot be normative without extraordinary confirmation, because mimesis breaks down.

By these criteria, Johnson is willing to discount even his own supernatural experiences. Discussing the phenomenon of “calling,” or hearing voices impossibly distant (a kind of auditory second sight), Johnson confesses “that one day at Oxford, as he was turning the key of his chamber, he heard his mother distinctly call—Sam. She was then at Lichfield [sic]; but nothing ensued” (Boswell, *Boswell’s* 4: 94). Without a narrative confirmation of the voice’s import—without “being told something which cannot be known but by supernatural means”—it cannot be verified as a source originating outside of Johnson’s mind. The voice remains equivocally lodged between
Mr. Tyro’s terms) melancholic “fancy” and the truly “auricular.” Boswell, however, declares that such calling “is, I think, as wonderful as any other mysterious fact, which many people are very slow to believe” (94-95). The specter of reality appears in Boswell’s emphasis on “mysterious fact,” and his excitement demonstrates how the provocative charge of the fantastic could propel a narrative. Johnson’s little story is so compelling, it doesn’t matter whether the equivocal impression is a “real” communique from realms invisible. Teasing without confirming, it haunts in a way that more overt supernaturalism could not.

_Eighteenth-Century Narrative Portents_

Many storytellers who shared Johnson’s theological commitments also shared his reluctance to portray encounters with spiritual beings. Some, however, embraced Boswell’s interest in ambiguous invisible agency, apparently satisfied that their narrative authority could convince another, partly because haunting is so common. The experience of mysterious influence, if not the fact of spectral agency, is demonstrable. Just as readers might believe a novel hero was “real” because his experiences resemble common life, so too they might credit the hero’s ascription of spiritual agency if it mimics the everyday experience of mysterious impressions, what we today might call a “sixth sense” or a shiver up the spine.

Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, subjects of chapters one and three, were especially adept at weaving these supernatural signs into the world of the everyday. Their hints, impulses, and dreams may be mere fancy or may be external visitations; despite a difference in approach, they share interest in an equivocal mode of experience that
Tzvetan Todorov calls the fantastic. Well before Gothic novelists and Romantic poets explored its aesthetic and psychological potential, the fantastic gained credit as portent of invisible realms in part because early eighteenth-century narrative was buttressed by the “cultural storehouse” of ambiguous spiritual terminology developed in demonology.9

Chapter one takes up Defoe’s surprisingly blunt endorsement of spiritual agency in *Robinson Crusoe* and its two sequels. Defoe’s descriptions of mental and imaginative processes, read in intertextual relationship with his earlier journalism and especially the treatises on the supernatural he wrote at the end of his life, reveal a mind much at home with the thinking of late seventeenth-century apparition narratives. This concern, in turn, shaped his narrative: many of Crusoe’s key decisions stem from his interpretation of seemingly spiritual impulses so that the plot hinges upon supernatural consciousness, whether or not one believes the author’s attribution of source. Why, asks the shipwrecked Crusoe, has he for years escaped the headhunters who hold celebrations on his island? Perhaps “a strange Impression upon the Mind, from we know not what Springs, and by we know not what Power, shall over-rule us to go” one way rather than another, “and it shall afterwards appear, that had we gone that Way which we should have gone, and even to our Imagination ought to have gone, we should have been ruin’d and lost” (186).

Richardson, by contrast, seems to retreat significantly from this suggestion. Chapter three, to skip forward momentarily for the sake of contrast, addresses the largely hidden equivocal presences in his novels, especially the goodly impulses that are

9 The term “cultural storehouse” I have appropriated from Cynthia Wall. In *The Prose of Things*, Wall argues that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century description looks spare to modern eyes because earlier readers shared a “cultural storehouse” of visual imagery that could be evoked with few words whose full resonance is now depleted (11). The sense of lost meanings, I argue, also holds true for a spiritual-supernatural lexicon.
repeatedly rejected in *Clarissa* (1747-48). Before her abduction, Clarissa echoes Mr. Tyro’s vocabulary, caution, and sense of compulsion when she tells of a “dream which has made such an impression upon me, that, slightly as I think of dreams, I cannot help taking this opportunity to relate it to you” (342). She neglects to act on the impression (indeed, never mentions it again) though she suffers the same predicted consequence as Mr. Tyro: death. Spiritual agency elicits only a counterfactual conditional—what might have happened if Clarissa or Lovelace had listened to their various internal warnings?—as divine justice is shunted to the afterlife. Plot does not appear to hinge on the supernatural at all, even though the dismissal of mysterious signs is precisely what initiates the story and despite the fact that Lovelace appears to see a ghost at the end of his life. Readers are more likely to miss supernatural agency in *Clarissa* than in *Robinson Crusoe* because Defoe trains his audience in spiritual communication, whereas Richardson leaves it to readers to find and interpret for themselves.

Richardson’s submerged treatment of subtle spiritual agency was not just a difference in style but also in rhetorical strategy. Chapter two charts the distinction, analyzing how various discourses of melancholy, from Defoe’s time to Richardson’s, tempered supernatural influence without denying its possibility by steering the reader to more practical remedies for the English malady, such as temperance or heavenly meditations. Depression and its attendant spiritual condition, enthusiasm, had long been vectors of invisible agency in everyday life. Robert Burton established an intense and

10 The only time Richardson offers anything like an extended intertextual reference to demonology is in Lovelace’s impious and jocular dismissal of apparition narratives when he discusses his dreams of tricking Clarissa (924). Unless otherwise noted, all *Clarissa* references will be to the 1985 edition edited by Angus Ross.
elaborate relationship between medical and supernatural causes at the beginning of the
seventeenth century, and when Joseph Addison took up the subject one hundred years
later, he continued to play both sides. In his journalism and his play *The Drummer*,
Addison rebuffs the credulity of the superstitious as evidence of nothing more than a
perverse melancholia best counteracted by cheer, but treats skepticism worse. He rejects
the use of “real” spirits in verisimilar stories but enjoys the intense power of the
supernatural as narrative device and even puts it on a continuum with his own power of
storytelling. Writing in the voice of “Mr. Spectator,” Addison is “apt to join in Opinion
with those who believe that all the Regions of Nature swarm with Spirits; and that we
have Multitudes of Spectators on all our Actions, when we think our selves most alone”
(1: 54). Like Locke’s spirits, both the “Multitudes of Spectators” and Addison’s fictional
Mr. Spectator are inaccessible to physical sense, but their influence is no less real on that
account. A thronging invisible realm looms even if its direct representation is
incompatible with reason.

What Addison tries to accommodate in this compromise is a fragile conceptual
structure, prone to splitting apart. In one direction is Richardson’s subdued
supernaturalism; in the other, Horace Walpole’s exploded Gothic ghosts. Richardson’s
close friends and correspondents, the graveyardist Edward Young and the medical doctor
George Cheyne, followed the steadfast but submerged approach to spiritual agency.
Young’s melancholic night verse and Cheyne’s medical and philosophical treatises on
melancholy emerge from a demonological background, with the one anticipating spiritual
converse after death and the other acknowledging the spiritual valences of the English
malady. Both readily admit the possibility of apparitional influence in real life, even
strongly defend the existence of angels and demons, but their stories focus on more pressing issues in the diegetic present, a pattern that can be seen in the works of Robert Blair and James Hervey as well.

Chief among these pressing issues was practical optimism in the face of melancholy. God does not only enable, but “enjoy[s] us to be Happy,” writes Young in *A Vindication of Providence* (1728),\(^{11}\) and this happiness could be pursued without the uncertain agency of angels, through the contemplation of proper night thoughts. Suggestively, Young hints that he would consider “the beatifick Vision of God, the Presence of Christ, the Conversation of Angels” in a second installment of *A Vindication*, but the sequel never came (3). The conversation of angels is left to float suggestively in the background, which is a fitting haunting. As Hervey ventures, “’TIS possible, that I am encompassed with such a Cloud of Witnesses; but it is certain, that GOD, the infinite and eternal GOD, is ever with me” (2: 14). Like the moon in eclipse, the spiritual realm disappears from sight but continues to exert a gravitational pull on realistic narrative.

It is in the mental explorations of new Gothic storytelling, the subject of chapter four, that the skeptical “Enlightenment,” ironically, gains ground on the supernatural. Gothic novels indulge long stretches of spectral phenomenology, but tend to dispel belief through either rational explanation of spirits or overindulgence in ghosts. Haunting becomes an aesthetic experiment rather than a possible spiritual communication. Horace Walpole, pioneer of the genre, originally asserted that his frenetically supernatural *Castle of Otranto* (1764) was a translation of a medieval manuscript, but in a second preface he revealed that the ruse of translation was a gesture of authenticity, to give the audience a

\(^{11}\) From the unpaginated dedication to the queen.
simulation of pre-enlightened superstitious belief now that readers were (supposedly) less credulous. Ann Radcliffe attempted to produce the affect/effect of haunting through plots that seemed supernatural but proved physically explicable. In both modes, Gothic fictions assert a distance from the demonologically-inspired invisible realms of earlier, equivocally credulous storytellers.

The psychological force of spectrality would continue unabated long after. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing in the next century, thought ghostly visitations a common encounter but not evidence of supernatural visitation. The imagination, which for earlier writers had served as medium of exchange with invisible realms, he elevated to position of authority. In *The Friend*, Coleridge recounts how a reflection of his hearth fire on the window gave the impression that the woods behind were aflame. Likening this image to Martin Luther’s visions of devils, he writes, “substitute the Phantom from Luther’s brain for the images of reflected light (the fire for instance) and the forms of his room and its furniture for the transmitted rays [from the forest behind], and you have a fair resemblance of an apparition, and a just conception of the manner in which it is seen together with real objects” (145). No question of the reality of the experience, or of the sincerity or sanity of the witness. Interior and exterior combine seamlessly, and all people could be subject to this operation of the imagination.

Eighteenth-century authors, to apply Coleridge’s conceit anachronistically, recognized that the forest fire may be, in most cases, reflection/projection. Believers, however, entertained the possibility that someone might have sneaked inside to light the hearth and create the impression of forest fire for a reason. Imagination was not just purveyor of images from invisible worlds within the mind, but potential interface for
spiritual realms without. This obscurity of the human interior translated into ambivalence about the “objective” exterior.

\textit{Invisible Movement through Time}

While Defoe did not force his readers to accept supernatural explanations, Crusoe readily advocated spiritual hermeneutics and described the process for emulation. Richardson’s position, at least in \textit{Clarissa}, was slightly different. He would agree in theory with Samuel Johnson that subjective experiences involving spirits cannot be normative, but accommodated them in the narrative anyway, as latent apprehensions in everyday life. Instead of being instrumental proofs of religion, spirits served only a secondary, confirming role for those already convinced. Richardson wanted readers to focus on moral decisions as the best spiritual portents.

To read \textit{Robinson Crusoe} (1719), \textit{Clarissa} (1747-48), and \textit{Rasselas} (1759) in sequence is to see a movement from heavily advocated belief in an invisible realm, to belief that is confirmed only to the properly trained, to belief without visible evidence. \textit{Visible Plots, Invisible Realms} explores the narratological implications of this array. The early English novel, I argue, begins with a sophisticated supernaturalism that renders mental and imaginative operations equivocal. While the focus on things and “common” people might seem to embrace Lockean materialism, an ambivalent language of agency opens a space for the realistic representation of spiritual converse, in part by giving it plausible deniability. As Dr. Johnson would put it, novel characters may not have the “authority” to “convince another” of the existence of spirits, but they do offer a witness
of haunting experience, which is all that supernatural investigation had ever been able to offer.

At the far end of this process, the overtly visible supernatural in Gothic fiction usurps the lure of belief in an influential invisible realm at the expense of theological truth claims. Gothic demystification did not eliminate haunting, however. The novels of the American Charles Brockden Brown infuse a skepticism that undercuts the very materialist epistemology which had banished the supernatural from everyday life. Brown might seem to follow Ann Radcliffe in exposing physical origins for mysterious events, but he advances a step further by portraying material causes as so very strange themselves that they seem just as unlikely as the supernatural, leaving the reader in a state of unresolved doubt. Brown ratchets up Defoe’s Todorovian fantastic to a disturbing level without offering comforts of credulity or science. His novels are a pivot to alluring nineteenth-century supernatural stories, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) and James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824), that blend material and invisible realms without restoring rational order or Christian cosmology.

Some scholars trace an incipient disenchantment already in the method of Richardson. McKeon argues that Pamela “does not evince Robinson[ Crusoe]’s willingness to validate the secret workings of the imagination as the voice of God” and that Richardson “inevitably participates, however, tacitly, in the undeniable turn toward extreme skepticism that is implied in [Pamela’s] fitful awareness of the projective and constructive powers of her own mind” (362, 363). It is true that Pamela demonstrates the potential to “disclose the radically subjective bases of all cognition”—and I would argue,
as others have done, that one could say the same for Robinson Crusoe—but both novelists underwrite their fictional worlds with an all-governing providence and an actively signifying invisible realm. Supernatural clues are there for the taking, and the event proves the validity of belief. For Brockden Brown, however, the extreme skepticism that McKeon finds in Pamela is encoded in the Gothic text itself, as part of its driving narrative force rather than a byproduct implication of its operations. One could debate whether this is a subversion of Enlightenment principles or a culmination of its mode of critique. What is significant is that the triumph of materiality in the genre of everyday life is always provisional.

Visible Plots, Invisible Realms reveals a conception of the eighteenth-century character as cosmically permeable, a permeability which, in turn, affects narrative development. Invisible influence shaped plots, empowered the realism of fiction, and bequeathed to the novel a method for fantasticizing mental processing itself. The “cognitive profile of the eighteenth-century fictional narrative is too variegated to designate any of its mind-reading triangulations as either dominant or essential,” writes Lisa Zunshine, and it is past time to include equivocal spirits within this variegated “cognitive profile” of mind reading (175).

This is not to suggest that there was a monolithic approach to portraying the invisible realm, or that a majority or even a plurality of storytellers evinced an interest in spiritual cosmology. Rather, I argue that the potential for including the invisible realm within the definitional limits of everyday life was open for authors and that their fictional

---

12 I am indebted for this concept of permeability to Charles Taylor’s notions of the “porous” versus the “buffered” self in A Secular Age.
creations took on spectral character in society, whether they believed in spirits or not.

This is a story unique to the eighteenth century, but its legacy persists. In the
“enlightened” twenty-first century, ghost stories (and their technological cousin, alien-
abduction narratives) demonstrate an evergreen lure, audiences bear witness to the active
social life of fictional characters by their expression of grief at the conclusion of
television series, and science works in concert with storytelling to provide evidence of the
mind spectrally divided against itself.\textsuperscript{13} If verisimilar fiction brought a new world of
material things into view, we have never escaped the haunting of invisible realms in the
visible plots of everyday lives.

\textsuperscript{13} For the grief of television series concluding, see Russell and Schau. For the haunting of
neurological disorder, see Susannah Cahalan’s \textit{Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness}
(2012). Cahalan self-consciously invokes the language of possession to describe an onset
of anti-NMDA-receptor autoimmune encephalitis, at one point comparing her symptoms
to Regan MacNeil’s in \textit{The Exorcist} (222-23).
1. Crusoevian Spirits and the Eighteenth-Century Novel

_Beyond the Providential and the Material_

Discovering “the Print of a Man’s naked Foot on the Shore” of his island after fifteen years of solitude, Robinson Crusoe reacts “as if [he] had seen an Apparition,” and for a time “fancy’d it must be the Devil” (170, 171). To calm his apprehensions, Crusoe reasons that the print was his own and he “had play’d the Part of those Fools, who strive to make stories of Spectres, and Apparitions; and then are frighted at them more than any body” (173). The problem is that the print on reexamination proves too large for his foot. Crusoe finally determines that savages, not Satan, must have visited the island, and while this thought is disconcerting too, his increasing confidence in a rational explanation allows him to transform fear “into Thankfulness to that Providence, which had deliver’d me from so many unseen Dangers” (186).

That is Crusoe’s comfort, but Defoe leaves the reader uncertain whether providential help is a mental projection. This conflict between theology and psychology has framed critical debate about the novel ever since: is _The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe_ (1719) a narrative of providential design, or is it skeptical analysis? What the either/or misses is the import, even critical importance, of the “Apparitions” Crusoe seems so anxious to dismiss. Though Robinson impugns superstition, he disseminates invisible influence throughout the _Crusoe_ trilogy as elusive presences trouble his thoughts at key moments in the narrative. Crusoe and others make decisions based on the promptings of these mysterious impulses, conferring on “spirits” an active agency that shapes plot.
Robinson Crusoe not only records this evidence of apparitions, he also shares their wavering ontological status: is “Crusoe” the pseudonym for an actual castaway? Defoe’s alias? An allegory of anyman? An exotic fiction? Something else? Defoe never tells, dwelling instead on ambiguity in his prefaces to the three Crusoe volumes: “I, Robinson Crusoe, being at this Time in perfect and sound Mind and Memory, Thanks be to God therefore, do hereby declare […] that the Story, though Allegorical, is also Historical” (Serious 51). Crusoe takes on the authorial voice to address readers paratextually in the post-narrative present and audaciously invokes God as witness to his obfuscation, enlisting all the literary trappings of a “real” person to squirm out of questions of truth. It is an oath to reality when we are no longer sure what “reality” is.

Readers may register a sense of shifting reality about Defoe himself, as he is endlessly recreated in scholarship like so many Shandean wax noses. “Daniel Defoe—we keep saying, generation after generation—is not the man we took him for” (Hunter, “Serious Reflections” 1). It is tempting to argue for another “new” Defoe, whose subtle, middling spirits and spectralized flesh-and-blood characters are elided in larger providentialist/materialist debates about his fiction, but scholars have, in fact, increasingly turned to Defoe’s demonological works for a fuller picture of the author.14

---

14 The introductions for the Pickering and Chatto edition of Defoe’s supernatural works by Peter Elmer, John Mullan, and G.A. Starr are notable explorations of Defoe’s use of the supernatural. Troy Boone offers a balanced account of Defoe’s spiritual beliefs and skepticism in “Narrating the Apparition.” Jayne Lewis also analyzes Defoe’s spirits at length, as literary effect: “Apparition A.D. [after Christ], in other words, was for Defoe a fundamentally literary event, an epiphenomenon of an encounter with letters” (“Spectral” 92). John Richetti has written several articles which take serious, if skeptical, stock of Crusoe’s spirits, while Maximillian Novak and Geoffrey Sill have each re-examined Defoe’s spirits in recent years, with Sill’s “Defoe and the Birth of the Imaginary” giving especial credence to Defoe’s overall supernatural system. Most recently, Katherine Ellison, Novak, Riccardo Capoferro, and Kit Kincade have examined various aspects of
Defoe is, through the shifting critical accounts, still “the man we took him for”: a complicated figure. What is lacking is an analysis of Defoe as central early figure in developing the spectral phenomenology of eighteenth-century storytelling. Visible plots throughout the period, from the fictional narratives of novelists to the real lives of their readers, bear an impress of invisible realms which Defoe charted most thoroughly. Decades before the Gothic, he bequeathed to the novel a language and epistemology of fiction that “possesses,” with or without spirits.

The mystery of the footprint in the sand—why only a single print? is it a mark of the devil? a sign of man? a projection of anxiety?—has made it a crux in Defoe studies. Robert Folkenflik summarizes providentialist and materialist interpretations to highlight a common semiotic instability: “for Crusoe the signs are problematic and the reading of them is filled with anxiety, the anxiety of interpretation” (98-99). Citing Michael McKeon’s argument that *Robinson Crusoe* reflects an early eighteenth-century epistemological crisis of old spiritual truths threatened by materialism and scientific inquiry, Folkenflik extends the critique to reading in general: “An epistemological crisis is a semiotic crisis is a hermeneutic crisis, and the upshot in the world of Crusoe is a series of profoundly ambiguous events” (99). Neither providentialist nor materialist paradigms can dispel this ghost of ambiguity.


15 See McKeon 83-87 and 315-37.

16 As Leopold Damrosch noted in 1973, even of Defoe’s non-fiction: “It is easy enough to propose possible readings for each passage; the trouble is that so many of them are possible” (“Defoe” 159).
For providentialist interpreters, *Robinson Crusoe* reflects the Puritan textual heritage in reading the physical world as divine symbology: “When an interpreter imposed a total system on his metaphor (a system which he hoped would approximate the spiritual reality), he constructed an allegory, suggesting the comprehensive emblematic significance of each thing and event he portrayed” (Hunter, *Reluctant* 122). This is more than apt for Crusoe’s case. As G.A. Starr writes, “deliverances at sea were seen as particularly dramatic and convincing instances of the role of Providence, so that these nautical motifs occur in religious works of all kinds” (*Defoe* 95). What appears at first to be coincidence or good fortune in life—finding that a wrecked ship will stay intact long enough for supplies to be recovered or that a discarded meal sack has sprouted up English barley, and so on—gets deciphered as evidence of God’s providence. And so the reading is structured: if we learn to interpret as Crusoe does, we shall recognize providence in our own lives.

The status of revelation as interpretation, however, produces a tension between apparent didactic purpose and textual irony. When “is Defoe consciously exploiting an ironic effect, and when is he simply unaware of it?” (Damrosch, “Defoe” 153). A providentialist view, John Richetti notes, “assumes that Defoe was in full control of his materials, and it depends upon an absolutely firm connection between the historical personage we call Daniel Defoe and his imaginative writing” (64). That assumption, however, is porous—and not just from the perspective of modern critical skepticism. In *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. D---- De F--, of London, Hosier* (1719), Charles Gildon mocked Defoe’s mismanagement of religious didacticism. Writing in dialogue form, Gildon has Daniel Defoe explain his intent to Robinson Crusoe
directly: “I make you set out as undutiful and disobedient to your Parents; and to make your Example deter all others, I make you Fortunate in all your Adventures, even in the most unlucky, and give you at last a plentiful Fortune and a safe Retreat” (xvi). This narratology mirrors providence, with Defoe taking on the God function and ineptly rewarding vice.

A main line of critical discussion has endorsed Defoe as true providential force and, correspondingly, “God” as Crusoe’s psychological fiction. Crusoe, argues Michael Seidel, uses language “in such a way that he builds a replicate universe in isolation,” willing comfort into island life through his own interpolation of divine influence (191). Even the apologists for providentialism recognize that God figures retrospectively along a dual time scheme, in which the older, narrating-Crusoe contrasts the day-to-day flow of events in diegesis with a plotting of those events according to a divine conversion narrative.17 This allows Crusoe “to structure his past rather than his future, which latter always remains at least a possible field of operations for free-will” (Sim 172). When he does shape that future, Crusoe’s “fatal […] Propension”—what he identifies early in The Life as his predilection for wandering from home (57)—is a more evident gauge for prospective action than God’s will.18 But Crusoe’s actions frequently escape reading either as divine mandate or human inclination. With a subtle language of hints and impulses, Crusoe builds a mysterious atmosphere in which seemingly external influences

17 See Hunter, Reluctant 143-47.
18 Crusoe in his 60s, for example, decides on the basis of these “propensions” to leave behind a secure life in England for Farther Adventures, ostensibly repeating the mistake of the first volume (5-13).
impinge on thought, pointing to the agency of an uncanny third presence between God and man.

A Framework for Apparitions

Two substantial passages, one from The Life and one from The Farther Adventures, provide a conceptual framework for communication with spirits in the Crusoe trilogy. The first comes in the wake of Crusoe’s alarm at the footprint. Although he takes pains to exorcise mind-made specters, Crusoe never condemns apparitions as such. Meditating on the odds of his escaping death by headhunter all those years, he speculates that

when we are in (a Quandary, as we call it) a Doubt or Hesitation, whether to go this Way, or that Way, a secret Hint shall direct us this Way, when we intended to go that Way; nay, when Sense, our own Inclination, and perhaps Business has call’d to go the other Way, yet a strange Impression upon the Mind, from we know not what Springs, and by we know not what Power, shall over-rule us to go this Way; and it shall afterwards appear, that had we gone that Way which we should have gone, and even to our Imagination ought to have gone, we should have been ruin’d and lost. (186)

Like the footprint, the printed characters on the page, and ultimately Crusoe himself (the character in print), this “Impression upon the Mind” at once entertains the possibility of deliberate inscription while equivocating about source and intention—“know not” is the dominant sensation, reinforced by the long, shifting syntax of the sentence. Having just
thanked God for deliverance, Crusoe might seem to credit providential intervention, but
he does not speak of a singular agent. Rather, he describes “a Proof of the Converse of
Spirits, and the secret Communication between those embody’d, and those unembody’d”
(186). Whoever is speaking, Crusoe believes it is not directly God. It is a they.

Katherine Ellison offers one of the most nuanced readings of this system of
spiritual communications but stretches the network to include phenomena like the
footprint, which Crusoe identifies as merely providential or material signs (and not as
transmissions of middling spirits): “The print is a clear demonstration of his theory of
angelic converse: it is novel, mysterious, indirect, and forces Crusoe to struggle between
a number of interpretive possibilities” (“Mediation” 109). The print does put Crusoe into
interpretive mania, but it is not a “clear demonstration” of his apparition theory, as he
ultimately finds a satisfying material cause. “I consider’d that the Devil might have found
out abundance of other Ways to have terrify’d me than this of the single Print of a Foot.
[…] All this seem’d inconsistent with the Thing it self, and with all the Notions we
usually entertain of the Subtilty of the Devil” (171). The “real” and unresolved angelic
(and demonic) transmissions are mental imprints, which are less susceptible to rational
explanation.

Crusoe elaborates on this transmission or “Converse of Spirits” in the opening
chapter of *The Farther Adventures*. Here, Crusoe’s original “fatal […] Propension” to
wander, a “Propension of Nature” against “the Commands of my Father,” yields to a
“native Propensity” and a “strong inclination” to “go abroad again” (*Robinson* 57,
*Farther* 6). Propension now seems to have divine import, though Crusoe offers a proviso:
“I know not to this Hour, whether there are any such Things as real Apparitions, Spectres,
or walking of People after they are dead, or whether there is any Thing in the Stories they
tell us of that Kind, more than the Product of Vapours, sick Minds, and wandring
Fancies” (6). Supernatural influence is slippery (“know not” again governs the sentence),
but with rational objections to superstitious “Stories” duly acknowledged, Crusoe can
offer his own experience as carefully examined evidence of spiritual visitation, in which
propensity becomes spiritual vision itself, a return to his island:

my Imagination work’d up to such a Height, and brought me into such
Extasies of Vapours, or what else I may call it, that I actually suppos’d my
self, often-times upon the Spot. [...] One Time in my Sleep I […]
witnessed] Things that I had never heard of, and that indeed were never all
of them true in Fact: But it was so warm in my Imagination, and so
realiz’d to me, that to the Hour I saw them, I could not be perswaded, but
that it was or would be true. [...] What there was really in this, shall be
seen in its Place: For however I came to form such Things in my Dream,
and what secret Converse of Spirits injected it, yet there was very much of
it true. I say, I own, that this Dream had nothing in it literally and
specifically true: But the general Part was so true, [...] that the Dream had
too much Similitude of the Fact. (6-7)
The claim for the reality of an invisible realm mirrors Crusoe’s claims about his own
reality in the preface to *Serious Reflections*. Literal truth gives place to what is “very
much” true—to what serves as “Similitude.” But unlike God’s allegorical truths, which
reveal eternal verities through emblems (a shipwreck survival interpreted as God’s
mercy), these allegorical not-quite truths point to other happenings on earth. Where
providential truth might lead to a change in attitude after due introspection, the partial
truth revealed by Crusoe’s potential apparitions leads to direct plot-changing choices.

Defoe’s architecture of imagination in this passage clarifies how the natural and
sinful kind of propension is distinguished from the “Doubt or Hesitation” that Crusoe in
The Life perceives as secret hints which overrule “Sense, our own Inclination, and
perhaps Business.” For superstitious people, “wandring Fancies” generate ghosts. The
healthy and sober imagination, however, can be a medium of visions “injected” by
spirits.19 Crusoe’s “Imagination work’d up to such a Height” because he had a healthy
inclination to go abroad: that is, inclination generated imagination, not imagination the
inclination.

The distinction might seem thin. There can be no guarantee of supernatural
agency in inclinations, as Crusoe himself recognizes explicitly in his proviso and
implicitly through his qualifications (“whether or not,” “what there was really,” “for
however,” “but,” “yet”). Rather than cast doubt on Crusoe’s vision, however, these
qualifications demonstrate his rationality. Crusoe is not uncritically peddling “the Product
of Vapours.” The event will prove the vision—it “shall be seen in its Place”—and in the
meantime, Crusoe can recruit witnesses to his credibility. His wife, rather than balk at the
desire to go abroad, “believ’d there was some secret Impulse of Providence upon” him
(7). Thus, when Crusoe says an offer to sail back to his island “join’d in so effectually
with my Inclination, that nothing could oppose me,” his decision is not an act of

19 When Crusoe in The Serious Reflections meditates on his episodes of delirium, he says
any vision of devils “was not meer Imagination, but it was the Imagination rais’d up to
Disease” (227).
recidivism but of spiritually informed deliberation, and the narrative pivots on the hint of a “secret Converse of Spirits” (11).

This elusive “converse” aligns spirits with second causes, or material evidences of God’s designing providence, rather than the first cause, God himself. As Crusoe says, when trying to convert Friday, “Nature assisted all my Arguments to Evidence to him, even the Necessity of a great first Cause and over-ruling governing Power; a secret directing Providence, and of the Equity, and Justice, of paying Homage to him that made us, and the like” (218). Where God “directs” and “overrules,” Crusoe’s invisible beings can only suggest and encourage. Like material nature, they serve a supportive role, as interpretable evidence that Crusoe can use to “assist[…] Arguments” for the first cause.

Thus, when Crusoe is offered the opportunity to return to his island, he says, “[n]othing can be a greater Demonstration of a future State, and of the Existence of an invisible World, than the Concurrence of second Causes, with the Ideas of Things, which we form in our Minds, perfectly reserv’d, and not communicated to any in the World” (Farther 10, my emphasis). The man who extends this offer, Crusoe’s nephew, is the second cause—the material instrument, as it were—whose appearance concurs with the “Ideas of Things” in Crusoe’s mind. But the “Ideas of Things,” in turn, are an impression of the invisible world and act as a spiritual second cause. Both the material and the spiritual second causes are sources of narrative action, a license to engage in another seafaring adventure. What they cannot provide is providential assurance. At the point of encounter with second causes, the result of Crusoe’s actions is still in doubt: the voyage may be a wonderful success, it may end in a shipwreck, but in any case, Crusoe must decide to undertake it or not.
Providence and spirits are not just different in kind, then; they serve different narrative functions. The first cause influences plot at the level of syuzhet, second causes at the level of fabula, and interpretation slips in between them. Providentialist readings tend to follow physical second causes back to their origin in the first cause, as Crusoe often does himself. Materialist readings, on the other hand, argue that physical second causes are the beginning and end of the story; they lead back only to the random, material world and to the imaginative power inside Crusoe’s head. A notion of spiritual second causes does not let the critic into Crusoe’s mind—or God’s—so easily, however, and this impasse is key to the spectral narratology of eighteenth-century fiction. We are never quite sure who or what is beaming messages into the protagonist’s imagination, leading to a haunted encounter with plot itself.

Haunted Plot

After Crusoe hears a cannon one night in The Life, he is disappointed to find a foundered ship and soon afterwards describes having “no Power to turn my Thoughts to any thing, but to the Project of a Voyage to the Main, which came upon me with such Force, and such an Impetuosity of Desire, that it was not to be resisted” (202). This desire teeters between inner propension and external transmission before a vivid dream tilts the balance. Sleeping Crusoe sees savages carrying a victim onto his island but before they can sacrifice him, the prisoner springs away, straight to Crusoe’s fortification, where dream-Crusoe saves him and makes him into his servant. Dream-Crusoe declares that he

---

20 Maximillian Novak, for example, argues that in Defoe’s eyes, the individual must look for God’s guiding hand because “the world ran according to natural laws or second causes” (“Defoe’s Spirits” 15).
now has a pilot to take him to the mainland (and thence to England), and he feels “such inexpressible Impressions of Joy, at the Prospect of my Escape in my Dream, that the Disappointments which I felt upon coming to my self, and finding that it was no more than a Dream, were equally extravagant the other Way, and threw me into a very great Dejection of Spirit” (203).

This is how Crusoevian adventures work. Forceful desires drive strange impressions, leading to the “extravagant”—to “roving beyond just limits or prescribed methods”—and thus seem like self-generated inclinations (Johnson, *Dictionary*). “No more than a Dream” becomes no less than spiritual disclosure, however, when Crusoe mobilizes his disappointment into an escape plan. After eighteen months, the dreamed-of savages do arrive in the flesh, and Crusoe witnesses an extraordinary scene through his perspective glass: a prisoner manages to break for the woods. Crusoe says “now I expected that part of my Dream was coming to pass, and that he would certainly take shelter in my Grove; but I could not depend by any means upon my Dream for the rest of it, (viz.) that the other Savages would not pursue him thither, and find him there” (205). The dream is not dependable absolutely, but its truth in general strengthens his original intention: “It came now very warmly upon my Thoughts, and indeed irresistibly, that now was my Time to get me a Servant, and perhaps a Companion, or Assistant; and that I was call’d plainly by Providence to save this poor Creature’s Life” (207).

Despite seemingly divine sanction, specifics of Crusoe’s dream continue to undergo transformation. Crusoe takes the prisoner (Friday, as it turns out) to his cave instead of his castle, “so I did not let my Dream come to pass in that Part” (208). Nor does the part about running to the mainland come to pass. Thus, while Crusoe
understands the course of events as a call by providence, the imperfection of the
communication (and Crusoe’s willingness to contradict it) suggests an agent other than
God. Crusoe receives not direct revelation, but a “Similitude of the Fact.” Nevertheless,
like Crusoe’s dream at the beginning of The Farther Adventures, “the general Part was
[…] true” enough to serve as a guide to action.

Strange impressions are not always such an obvious and attractive path to wish
fulfillment, inviting easy compliance. Sometimes they oppose natural inclinations. Near
the end of his tenure on the island, Crusoe is overjoyed when he spies the ship that will
evendually bear him away, but he does not immediately start for it: “yet I had some secret
Doubts hung about me, I cannot tell from whence they came, bidding me keep upon my
Guard” (241). He tries to find logical explanations for his wariness before giving his
strongest endorsement yet to an invisible realm:

    Let no Man despise the secret Hints and Notices of Danger, which
sometimes are given him, when he may think there is no Possibility of its
being real. That such Hints and Notices are given us, I believe few that
have made any Observation of things, can deny; that they are certain
Discoveries of an invisible World, and a Converse of Spirits, we cannot
doubt; and if the Tendency of them seems to be to warn us of Danger, why
should we not suppose they are from some friendly Agent, whether
supreme, or inferior, and subordinate, is not the Question; and that they
are given for our Good? (243)

Crusoe adopts a polemical tone, insisting on the validity of secret hints, but he still does
not claim absolute truth. He argues instead by rhetorical question. Since spiritual
communication remains a suppositional enterprise—even the agent is ambiguous—

Crusoe falls back on consequences: if the converse warns of danger, why should we not follow its suggestions, howsoever inconvenient? In this case, “secret Doubts” do save Crusoe. The ship is full of mutineers, and with the forewarning he is able to engineer a reverse insurrection.

Such hints are not confined to the island, either. After Crusoe escapes, he touches down at Portugal. Several times he prepares to board ship for the final leg home but backs out because he “had a strange Aversion to going to England by Sea at that time; and though I could give no Reason for it, […] yet I alter’d my Mind, and that not once, but two or three times” (271). Even on the verge of deliverance, alien propension works against “Sense, our own Inclination, and perhaps Business.” Crusoe abandons the sea voyage for good and repeats the jussive formula, “let no Man slight the strong Impulses of his own Thoughts in Cases of such Moment,” before reporting that two of the ships he would have taken come to bad ends. One was wrecked, with nearly everyone drowned, while the other “was taken by the Algerine” (271). Though he says these impulses are “his own Thoughts,” Crusoe is clearly not claiming origination as he finds his aversion groundless and changes his mind several times. Whatever it is, the hint brings Crusoe to a crisis point, a difficult decision, and acting upon it turns the plot in a definite direction. And by describing Crusoe’s process of decision-making with its shifts and uncertainties, Defoe makes the scenario an example of everyday experience that readers might apply to their own lives. It is, in short, novelistic.
Such hints, impulses, and passive thoughts might seed a confirmation bias\textsuperscript{21}—narrating-Crusoe might remember only those “communications” that resulted in a positive personal outcome—but the narrative complicates this alignment. Defoe does not restrict spiritual converse to Crusoe’s own experience, or even to his faith. In \textit{The Farther Adventures}, Crusoe learns that the Roman Catholic tenants of his island were saved from savages by the warning of secret impressions, an eyebrow-raising supernatural ecumenism when the reader might expect a condemnation of Papist superstition.\textsuperscript{22}

Elsewhere, Defoe hints at supernatural communication without directly advertising its agency. When Crusoe is saved from a fierce attack on Madagascar in \textit{The Farther Adventures} by sleeping on a boat, all he says in explanation is, “I know not what was the Occasion, but I was not so well satisfy’d to lye on Shore as the rest” (128). He does not even implicate impressions—the subtler tell-tale language is “know not.”

Crusoe also recounts at least one occasion in which secret hints fail to produce a result. After he hears the cannon of the ship that foundered (before the dream of capturing Friday), Crusoe is seized with a desire to sail out the next morning to find survivors:

“committing the rest to God’s Providence, I thought the Impression was so strong upon my Mind, that it could not be resisted, that it must come from some invisible Direction,

\textsuperscript{21} As Leopold Damrosch puts the case: “Self-congratulation merges with the frequently mentioned ‘secret hints’ of Providence until Crusoe learns to identify Providence with his own desires” (\textit{God’s} 198-99).

\textsuperscript{22} Ashley Marshall goes so far as to argue that the “most consistent theme in Defoe’s satires is his categorical condemnation of Catholicism” (557). One of the Catholic Spaniards sounds like a double of Crusoe, however, when he describes invisible communication: “I am satisfy’d our Spirits embodied, have a Converse with, and receive Intelligence from the Spirits unembodied and inhabiting the invisible World, and this friendly Notice is given for our Advantage, if we know how to make use of it’” (\textit{Farther} 40).
and that I should be wanting to my self if I did not go” (196). The only survivor, however, is a half-starved dog, so the rescue effort is a bust. Even the booty disappoints: “Upon the whole, I got very little by this Voyage, that was of any use to me” (199). Distinguishing true spiritual intimations from mere imaginings remains problematic, and the increasingly sanctified hero of the tale is not exempt from error. But if confidence never equals certainty, it does not give up on supernatural inference.

**Spiritual Cosmology, Coherence, and Uncertainty**

Crusoe’s modulated confidence in an active invisible realm is the haunted narratology in the novel’s rise, but it is easy to miss if the reader’s context is psychology instead of eighteenth-century demonology. John Richetti writes that when Crusoe heeds hints about the ship full of mutineers, he “trust[s] his intuition but interpret[s] his cautious hunch as proof of the reality of ‘an invisible world.’” (“Defoe”). The origin of the secret communication is his own mind, not apparitions.23 Historian Ian Bostridge appears to credit Defoe’s invisible realm by arguing for an “overlap” between a “real presence” and “a more metaphorical understanding of the Devil,” but emphasizes supernatural belief as primarily an ideological formation, “useful both as a symbolic marker of boundaries of the sacral state, and in its provision of a common enemy to unite orthodox Christians” (115, 136).24 Even those most dedicated to Defoe’s supernaturalism, including Maximillian Novak, tend to circumscribe spirits: “when he attempted a serious mood he

---

23 Richetti critiques Rodney Baine’s assessment of Defoe’s sincere belief by arguing that in Defoe’s demonological work, “one finds as the dominant emphasis an essentially satirical presentation of popular credulity and lingering superstition” (“Secular” 64).

24 Bostridge even goes so far as to argue that Defoe’s demonological treatises exhibit an “embarrassed, half-hearted, disorganized […] retreat from belief” (136).
much preferred to talk about Providence. Yes, there were spirits and angels about us whom we cannot see, but what is important is the observation of God’s presence in the world” (“Defoe’s” 15). Defoe’s wavering explorations of the invisible realm easily play back into providentialist and materialist interpretations of the novel.

While Defoe is ambiguous about lesser spirits, he is not glib. “Defoe could often reveal a strange mixture of cynicism and belief,” writes Novak (“Defoe’s” 14), and Defoe’s seriousness about invisible beings as plot agents is indicated by the care he takes in classifying spiritual communications in Crusoe’s *Serious Reflections*. Near the end, in a section titled “A Vision of the Angelick World,” Crusoe produces a table of “the more particular Discoveries of this Converse of Spirits, and which to me are undeniable”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dreams,</th>
<th>Impulses,</th>
<th>Involuntary sadness, &amp;c.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voices,</td>
<td>Hints,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noises,</td>
<td>Apprehensions,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(229)

There seems to be a logic in Crusoe’s ordering, if somewhat unintuitive—roughly, the first column deals in bodily sensations (even during slumber), the second in mental impressions that operate on mind instead of organs, and the third in inexplicable emotion. Whatever its logic, the schematizing indicates a desire to come to terms, scientifically

---

25 Novak has long maintained a guarded attitude, granting credence both to James Sutherland’s argument that the supernatural was simply a profitable topic and to the notion that Defoe was sincere, or at least partially sincere. Whatever Defoe’s sincerity, Novak seems to view the supernatural as primarily a platform for combating various skeptical heresies. See “Defoe, the Occult, and the Deist Offensive” 94, 100-105 and “Defoe’s Spirits” 12.
and persuasively, with supernatural phenomena, and it supplies a lexicon for identifying apparitions throughout *Robinson Crusoe*.

Seven years later, in *A System of Magick* (1727), Defoe reshuffles the categories but retains their essence when he records “three ways by which [the Devil] carries on his Kingdom in the World”:

1. By moving the Affections and Thoughts of Men, whether sleeping or waking; and this, as it respects his causing them to dream on any Occasion as he thinks fit, is one very considerable Branch of his Power.

2. By his exquisite Knowledge of Nature, by which he turns the Causes of things to his own Purposes, and often brings to pass such Events as suit with his particular Occasions.

3. By Illusion and Fraud, imposing upon the Senses, binding and blinding the Understanding and the Eyes, both of the Body and of the Minds of willingly-deceiv’d Men.

(163)

Item one combines inexplicable emotion with mental impressions as possible sources the devil might use to inject himself into dreams, while item three blends mental and bodily sensations, but neither introduces new concepts. The only item that looks different from *Serious Reflections* is number two, which becomes a little clearer in the context of *A System* as a whole. Since the devil knows so well how the natural world works, he is able to make highly probable guesses about the final effects of various causes (he cannot look
into the future). By divulging these guesses to those under his influence, he “often,” but evidently not always, “brings to pass such Events as suit with his particular Occasions.”

Although Robinson Crusoe tends to scapegoat the devil and focus on benevolent spirits, he does deal thoughtfully with demonic power—first in his theological discussions with Friday, then more explicitly in the Miltonic musings of his *Serious Reflections*:

> Whence comes Imagination to work upon wicked and vicious Objects when the Person is fast asleep […]? who forms Ideas in the Mind of Man? who […] but these insinuating Devils, who invisibly approach the Man sleeping or waking, and whisper all manner of lewd abominable Things into his Mind. (244-45)

The phrase “sleeping or waking” becomes a direct echo in *A System*, while these devils prompt the central question of Defoe’s spiritual cosmology: “Whence comes Imagination,” and “who forms Ideas in the Mind of Man?” Across multiple registers, from novels to supernatural treatises, Defoe exhibits a remarkable supernatural consistency.

This systematic inquiry into the invisible realm is not just a late-career innovation. Defoe two decades earlier had described “Converse with the World of Spirits” in nearly identical terms in his satire *The Consolidator* (1705):

> from whence come *Secret Notices*, *Impulse of Thought*, pressing *Urgencies of Inclination*, to or from this or that altogether Involuntary; but

---

26 As Folkenflik puts it, the devil is “shrewd about what will happen; … his knowledge of probabilities amounts almost to foreknowledge” (109).
from some waking kind Assistant wandring Spirit, which gives secret hints to its Fellow-Creature, of some approaching Evil or Good, which it was not able to foresee. (69)

The familiar conjunction of secret communications (notices, hints), imprinting (impulse, pressing), and propensions (urgencies of inclination) merge to implicate supernatural power in granting foresight. Defoe offers imagination as the medium, using the notion of “injection” (which he invokes in *The Farther Adventures*) to describe how his satiric lunar invention, an “Elevator,” enables spiritual communication: “This Engine is wholly applied to the Head, and Works by Injection; the chief Influence being on what we call *Fancy*, or Imagination” (69-70). Traces of the seventeenth-century, scientific search for apparitions can be seen in Defoe’s attempt to render supernatural communication not only realistic but materially explicable, obtainable “in a Mechanick way.” He strips the prefix “super” from “natural” to make spiritual conversation merely cryptonatural.27

In March of that same year (1705), Defoe entertained a question about ghosts sent by a correspondent to his political periodical, *A Review*. He focused on fancy “forming Devils in the Head, which never were in the Air,” but he conceded “the General part of the Question, That there may be such a thing as we call a Spirit, an Apparition, a *Phantome*, a *Spectre*, a *Ghost*” (66). Tempering assured analysis with wary concession, Defoe allows both, a pattern he maintains throughout his career. The Robinson Crusoe of

27 As G.A. Starr writes concerning *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), Defoe wanted to portray the natural and the supernatural as “connected and permeable, both as categories of thought and parts of a larger reality” (Introduction 1). Cf. Lewis on apparition narratives in the 1720s: “as is well known, the category of the natural and its attendant laws were under strenuous negotiation at the time” (“Spectral” 86).
*The Farther Adventures* wonders whether most apparitions are anything “more than the Product of Vapours, sick Minds, and wandring Fancies” after the Crusoe of *The Life* had declared “we cannot doubt” that hints “are certain Discoveries of an invisible World, and a Converse of Spirits.” Tone may shift according to rhetorical circumstance, but Defoe’s openness to the invisible realm remains steadfast. This combination of consistent belief and shifting tone, in turn, proved fertile narratological territory for the novel.28

**Defoe’s Spirits, Truth, and Verisimilitude**

In his account of Defoe’s enjoyment of “good ghost stories and relating them in vivid terms,” Novak touches the right key, though he does not play it: had Defoe “miraculously been transported to the end of the century, [he] would doubtless have distinguished himself among the ranks of the Gothic novelists” (“Defoe’s Spirits,” 9, 13). Defoe need not be transported—the novel, through his technique, is Gothic from the start. “Spirits” exert narrative agency in *Robinson Crusoe* irrespective of Defoe’s personal beliefs, while his fully-fleshed fictional characters mimic their apparitional quality in wider English society.

Any critical elision of this spectral world is understandable: there is no proof of spirits. Does a reliable supernatural agent “direct us this Way, when we intended to go

28 Critics sometimes point to *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* (1706) as evidence that Defoe was inconsistent about the invisible realm because the specter of Mrs. Veal contradicts his belief that human spirits cannot return to the land of the living, or, papering over the contradiction, that Defoe used the Veal story as a convenient defense of the persistence of the soul beyond death (for the latter, see Welch 398). Defoe, however, argued that good spirits can imitate dead humans in order to give weight to their message (see the story of “a Spirit coming in Apparition” of a deceased grandfather to benefit a family in *An Essay* [251]), and G.A. Starr has made the case “Why Defoe Probably Did Not Write *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*.”
that Way”? The question is never resolved. Defoe instead seems to pull two ways at once: toward spiritual accessibility with the non-marvelous nature of spiritual communications and toward greater uncertainty with the difficulty of distinguishing communications from cogitations. It is no mistake that he leaves the deeper points of debate about the existence of spirits to Glanvill and company, and focuses upon taxonomy and decision-making himself—uncertainty makes for poor apologetics (*An Essay* 46).  

For representing spirits in realistic registers, however, irresolution proves an asset rather than a weakness. First, it deflects heresy. If Crusoe’s “second-cause” supernatural communications prove unreliable, he can save face for God and the wider invisible realm. As Defoe says about failed spiritual converse in *An Essay*, “the fault is our own, we can by no means blame the insufficiency of the Notice, and say, to what purpose is it?” (195).  

Second, uncertainty preserves verisimilitude by not succumbing to marvelous romance. As Richetti argues, from a materialistic frame: “Crusoe is persuasively real because of his self-conscious uncertainty, his constant puzzlement as he seeks to extract a

---

29 Boone thus misses the point when, quoting Defoe’s denial to engage in the Glanvill debate, he argues “Defoe’s move is obviously ironic and defensive: there is even more opposition to belief in the supernatural in 1727 than in 1689” (179-80). Defoe is simply admitting that Glanvill is a better source of apologetics, something Peter Elmer acknowledges: this “absence suggests that Defoe had no intention of generating a scholarly controversy in print – an aversion which owed much, no doubt, to Defoe’s professed ignorance of the formal methods employed in such forms of discourse” (6).

30 Cf Baine: Defoe “evidently felt that if the intermediate spirits were free to act upon their own initiative, the inadequacy of their performance would not reflect upon Divine Providence” (Daniel 18). See also Defoe, *An Essay* 65 and 195, and Sill, “Defoe” 3.

31 In genre terms, this is Todorov’s “fantastic” mode, a liminal space between pure materialism and overt supernaturalism: “Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists[....] 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” (25). For more on Defoe as innovator of the fantastic mode, see Riccardo Capoferro.
working truth from the flow of circumstances that constitute his particular and unique life” (“Defoe” 126). By extension, uncertainty places spirits within the range of experience of every reader, the emergent focus of novelistic rhetoric.\textsuperscript{32} When Crusoe deliberates about strange hints and impulses, he models that experience to the reader and thereby gives credence to his claims about invisible beings. If he is willing to doubt them and their communications prove true anyway, they must be real.

Since Crusoe is confronted with uncertain hints before making a decision, invisible beings also possess a narratological advantage: they can act as plot changers rather than revelations in retrospective interpretation. Crusoe says he “never fail’d to obey the secret Dictate; though I knew no other Reason for it, than that such a Pressure, or such a Hint hung upon my Mind” (186). Just as a sinful “fatal […] Propension” is more accurate than God’s will in predicting Crusoe’s future, so too Crusoe acts more faithfully by mysterious sensations than by the interpreted lessons of providence or the rational logic of taking up a comfortable, middle station in life.

This is fitting since Crusoe becomes something of a specter himself. The congruity between Defoe’s approach to the supernatural and his approach to fictionality was not invisible to his contemporaries. Charles Gildon responded to Defoe’s portrayal of Crusoe as “historical” by transforming Robinson Crusoe into a kind of ghost who haunts his Sancho-Panza author. This Crusoe tosses Defoe in a blanket, who wakes to find it all a dream. Gildon’s Defoe at first tries to write the dream off, but an “unsavoury Stench” followed by palpable “Effects in my Breeches” suggest to him that something deeper is at

\textsuperscript{32} Readers of mid-century novels, Catherine Gallagher argues, were “expected to imagine themselves as the characters. […] A fictional ‘he’ or ‘she’ should really be taken to mean ‘you’” (351).
work: “this is a fresh Proof of my Observation in the second Volume of my Crusoe that there’s no greater Evidence of an invisible World, than that Connexion betwixt second Causes, (as that in my Trowsers) and those Ideas we have in our Minds” (xviii). Defoe, in his supernatural system and in his claim to historicity, is shown to be full of it.

Defoe, however, wasn’t willing to give up the ghost so easily. Crusoe’s clarification in the preface to Serious Reflections “that the Story, though Allegorical, is also Historical,” was designed to answer the objections of a Gildon.33 This strange and seemingly contradictory framing of the novel’s truth status may argue that “the historicity of the story is not essential for its moral success” (Kevin Seidel 170). It may also explore a new kind of fictionality based not on a suspension of real-world referentiality but on its potentially deceptive approximation.34 Michael Gavin’s metaphysical analysis of the passage, however, comes closest to a sense of Crusoe’s print-culture spectrality. Gavin argues that Defoe’s preface seems disorienting because it gives the Crusoe trilogy a peculiar ontological status. Robinson Crusoe is real in a representative function (“Crusoe’s claim to be real rests on two legs, that his life really happened, just to someone else, and that the knowledge he accumulates in Serious Reflections is useful and true”), and he is real by force of migrating “out of his narrated allegorical world and into the historical world of London print culture” (307, 323). He has a discursive existence which matters, even if he lacks a body.

In this double life, Crusoe is the novelistic cousin of Mr. Spectator, who drops into London society by policing the reception of his work, in propria persona. Defoe had,

33 See Gavin 306.
34 See Gallagher, especially 339.
several years before publication of *The Spectator*, proposed a close relationship between ghostly specter and fictional spectator in *The Consolidator*. Here, the same elevator “whereby the Intelligent Soul is made to converse with its own Species, whether embody’d or not” also gives rise to Defoevian narrative: “By this a Man fancies himself *in the Moon*, and realizes things there as distinctly, as if he was actually talking to *my Old Phylosopher*” (*Consolidator* 70). The implication is that the reader is already on this “Engine,” joining Defoe in his flight of fancy to the moon while also communicating with Defoe, who is a double of the “Old Phylosopher.” The elevator that aids imagination’s access to fake ghosts of enthusiasm and real spirits, as well as to fictional characters and the real authors behind them, can be none other than the printed word.

What Gavin writes of Crusoe as a “real” person applies also to the truth status of supernatural messages:

> In order to count as really existing, Crusoe need only describe episodes in the life of “any such Man” while building knowledge about the “Circumstances in any Mans life.” Like Locke’s real knowledge, Crusoe does not refer directly out into the world, but this does not mean he lacks existence entirely. The world conforms imperfectly and partially yet undeniably to the patterns of his adventures and reflections. (319)

Crusoe’s impulses and hints also conform “undeniably” to the “patterns” of the supernatural system Defoe develops throughout his career. While Crusoe disclaims certainty about the reality of any particular supernatural experience, he uses the myriad unverified instances as proof of his general spiritual cosmology by a kind of law-of-large-numbers logic. This representational approach to the invisible realm he endorses
explicitly in *A System of Magick* when, to bolster the “good foundation” of his supernatural system, he tells a story of doubtful veracity: “I will not put my Sanction to the Truth of all the Particulars, but the Story is of the same Use, whether one Word of the Fact be true or no” (128). We see the line to Kevin Seidel’s claim that moral success does not depend on historicity, and we see a destination in John Bender’s sense that for Defoe, the opposite of “fact” is not fiction, but (quoting Crusoe) that which has “any appearance of fiction in it” (11). Verisimilitude has a truth claim, and invisible beings (whether characters or middling angels) are, for Defoe, verisimilar.

The realist-supernatural narrative enjoyed currency in a kind of proto-short story form steeped in juridical discourse and empiricist epistemology, before jumping to long-form fiction with Daniel Defoe. As other eighteenth-century authors lampooned the supernatural and developed self-consciousness about fictionality, the apparition of the real continued to play alongside realistic apparitions. In the 1740s, Henry Fielding satirized the stretched realism of *Pamela* while real-life villagers rang bells for Pamela’s wedding, and Richardson had his villain Lovelace make fun of Glanvill’s supernatural system before witnessing an apparition on his death bed. Although no other novelist would attempt to systematize—and systematically deploy—the invisible realm as Defoe does, the possibility of spiritual intervention and especially the development of plot

---

35 Sill, writing on a similar comment of Defoe’s in *An Essay*, argues that “the veracity of the story and the reality of the apparition are less important than the moral effect of the story on its readers” (5-6). I argue that the confirmation of Defoe’s supernatural system is implied as part of the moral.

36 For example, Fielding’s Parson Adams, bewildered at finding himself in the wrong bedroom after getting turned around, declares anyone “an Infidel who doth not believe in Witchcraft. […] My Clothes are bewitched away too, and Fanny’s brought into their place” (314). For the story of Pamela’s church bells and Lovelace’s send up of demonologists, see chapter 3.
according to fantasticized decision-making, would continue to be key features of fictional narrative. If the eighteenth-century novel was a vehicle of secular materialism, it hardly exorcised spirits. The imprint of Defoe’s double spectrality continued to haunt realistic narrative decades before the introduction of more vivid ghosts in the Gothic novel.
2. The Spirits of Melancholic Optimism

In the two decades between the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Pamela* (1740), capital punishment for sorcery had been quietly abrogated with the Witchcraft Act of 1735, David Hume had begun his investigations into secular ethics (with the full brunt of the rational Scottish Enlightenment soon to follow), and the Deist controversy had reached an apex with the publication of Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730). The supernatural was pushed farther out into the periphery, and the overly credulous were attacked as “enthusiasts,” an old term of derision, or “Methodists,” a new one. Retreat, however, is not necessarily disappearance. Shifts in rhetoric and epistemological emphasis reveal continuing interest in invisible realms, especially among Richardson’s literary influences.

Where Defoe had appropriated apparition narratives for a phenomenological account of spirits, writers including Joseph Addison and the graveyard poets are more evident in Richardson’s attempt to “steal in” even non-esoteric Christian moral content as a kind of surrogate, understated sermon. Richardson “believed that his reading public as a whole had an antipathy to religion and he consequently wished to restrain his heroine’s devotional habits within the text itself” (Dussinger, “Conscience” 240). Defoe’s avowed apparition reading, no matter how equivocally advocated, would have undermined

---

37 John Dussinger examines Richardson’s reticence in “Stealing in the Great Doctrines of Christianity,” borrowing “stealing in” from Richardson’s postscript to the third edition of *Clarissa*. Carol Stewart argues that Richardson might have felt his work to be a more effective kind of sermon, for young people especially, due to “a perception of the clergy as inadequate advocates of the Anglican position, and of the Church itself as weak, corrupt or remote” (“Pamela” 39).
Richardson’s efforts to influence a skeptical readership. The story of muting supernatural content without disavowing it can be traced in Addison’s and the graveyard poets’ treatment of the formerly demonological disease of melancholy.\(^{38}\) These writers argued that while the devil might still move humors or stir the imagination to induce depression, the English malady was more likely to delude sufferers into false superstition than directly channel Satan.

They accordingly shifted the focus of treatment to non-spiritual, instrumental second causes—physical pathology and self-generated fancy—without denying that invisible agency could be involved. Graveyard poets, especially, exploited the lingering ambiguity in a visible way, shuttling between supernatural, psychological, and physiological implications of melancholy in what can seem a jarring combination of Augustan morality and proto-Romantic emotional sensibility.\(^{39}\) Some graveyard poets including Thomas Gray and Thomas Warton pushed a purely psychological and affective rendering of the melancholy grave with its attendant ghosts, anticipating Gothic and sentimental fiction. Others, however, and most notably Edward Young, retrenched Christian orthodoxy, offering a moral rendering of mortality that prepares readers to meet spirits on the other side. In this reading, the supernatural is dangerous because it might aggravate a misguided fear of death—better to inculcate God’s benevolence and the right ways of securing it than to play with spirits.

---

\(^{38}\) For the centrality of melancholy to graveyard poets and to mid-century poetry in general, see Moore 179 and Sickels 38.

\(^{39}\) Cf. Stephen Cornford on Young’s *Night Thoughts*: it “is a revealing product of an age which characteristically blended received, orthodox values with an inspirational, individualistic sensibility” (x). For graveyard poetry as replacement for seventeenth-century funeral sermons (rather than pre-Gothic gloom), see Eric Parisot (177-183) and Evert Jan Van Leeuwen.
Joseph Addison might seem the odd man out in this network, but I propose that graveyard poetics, whether psychologically tuned or morally disciplined, are rooted in his literary theory. Addison, self-proclaimed arbiter of British taste, was surprisingly verbose and open-minded about the “low” topic of apparitions. Spirits, he argued, operate in a substratum to material reality, but with a proto-Johnsonian skepticism about reliable testimony, he denied the credibility of reports of their activity. In Addison’s view, depictions of apparitions were not verisimilar extrapolations based on confirmed ghost-sightings—the minute reworking of experience which “realistic” historical narrative would require—but approximations of the spiritual world filtered through melancholic imagination. While Addison recognized a species of genius in this imaginative representation, he also recognized a danger of mistaking the artistic superstructure for the real substratum. Thus, Addison defended the spiritual realm on a theological level but made spirits disappear in his own literary practice by exposing the physical and psychological mechanisms of melancholy generating the vast majority of them. Indulging the frisson of supernatural agency, restraining-but-retaining its operations, and dismissing it altogether—all had a warrant in Addison.

His influence exerted a powerful invisible agency of its own. On the mundane level of intellectual transmission, Richardson evinces a direct Addisonian religious and literary debt. He borrows heavily from Addison’s posthumous *Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1721) in his doctrinal pamphlets including *The Infidel Convicted* (1731), and he extolls *The Spectator* in a 1751 issue of *The Rambler* as “one of the favourite

---

40 See Pettit passim, but especially 68-71.
amusements of my age to recollect.” But literary reliquiae are also closely tied to the
ghostly. Young declared Addison’s quiet, faithfully resigned death a performance
excelling his writing, linking authorship with the invisible realm: “His compositions are
but a noble preface; the grand work is his death: That is a work which is read in heaven:
How has it join’d the final approbation of angels to the previous applause of men?”
(Conjectures 104). The moral Addison trumps the aesthetic Addison, and Young’s
evocation of angelic spectators joining with a human audience presses beyond metaphor
for the author of The Spectator, which had “explicitly canvassed” an “analogy between
literary posterity and personal immortality” (Jost 617).

What connects these texts and authors rhetorically is a set of characteristics I call
melancholic optimism—more a mode of thought than a literary genre—which aids the
deflection (without deletion) of invisible beings. Depression was not God-pleasing, but
affliction was an undeniable fact of life. Addison, Young, and ultimately Richardson
refuse philosophic optimism, which declared that “God wishes only good and has created
as much as He could; […] and] any faults and evils arising from this continuum are only
apparent, not real, since nothing could have been other, or better, than it is” (Eberwein
153). They knew faults and evils were all too real. Yet, such pain was not intrinsic to
human existence; in fact, humans were designed for pleasure. Thus within seemingly
gloomy narratives, melancholic optimists portray pleasure as a good in and of itself rather
than the delusory force the Puritans had denounced. They reconcile the natural
melancholy of earthly life with man’s joyful telos and God’s benevolence by defining
happiness as a condition of being that overrides transitory feelings: “Joy’s a fixt State; a

41 Richardson wrote number 97 of Johnson’s Rambler (2: 153).
Tenure, not a Start” (Young, *Night Thoughts* VIII.967). Melancholic optimists advocate joy in heaven and on earth without promising happiness from moment to moment—hence melancholic optimism, not melancholic longsuffering or melancholic joy. This transcendent stance prioritizes moral decision-making regardless of temptation, death of loved ones, captivity, or any other exigency. Supernatural agency—whether angelic help or the potential demons behind melancholy—is just one more external circumstance, permissible and even salutary to ignore.

Richardson’s physician George Cheyne demonstrates in *Philosophical Principles of Religion* (1715) why melancholic optimism flourished in an era of shifting spiritual and scientific beliefs. Melancholy, he affirms, is not directly demonic, and its cure is largely a matter of diet and exercise, but the root problem remains religious because melancholy disrupts a spiritual gravity between God and man. Humans could restore their natural spiritual gravity through right living and thinking, and if, despite their discipline, melancholy continued to hold sway (which it was all too likely to do), they were at least on the path toward consummation of pleasure in heaven. Cheyne’s science provides a physical and spiritual-ethical etiology of melancholy, based partly on Newtonian attraction. Invisible forces linked to God were involved, Cheyne says, but his treatises,

---

42 Cf. Vivasvan Soni and Darrin M. McMahon on changing conceptions of happiness in the period. In a “widely shared” classical view, says McMahon, happiness “was not a function of feeling, but a function of virtue. And as such it frequently required denial, sacrifice, even suffering” (8). But Christianity also offered pleasurable rewards, “sensual – in the extreme,” which “might be taken as a sign of grace, [and so] happiness might be a direct reflection of the virtuous Christian soul” (11, 13). This new view brings “us very close to the truly momentous proposition that pleasure and happiness might be considered good in and of themselves” (13).

43 This need not imply the science was used correctly. “Cheyne’s inability to grasp the inconsistencies and obliquities of his own principles in relation to those of Newton […]"
like Young’s graveyard poetry and Addison’s journalism, suppress the invisible realm by emphasizing human moral effort. It is a system Richardson elaborates into tragedy by showing that the mind unreceptive to moral consequences will be even less receptive to the whispers of spirits.

In scriptural terms, Defoe, like the authors of apparition narratives, had attempted to provide the kind of objective spiritual evidence required by empirical doubting Thomases, and it drove his plots. The Biblical parallel closest to melancholic optimism, however, is the story of Dives and Lazarus. When the rich unbeliever dies, he pleads for a chance to come back from hell and warn his brothers from sin, but Abraham in heaven replies: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Holy Bible, Luke 16.31). Rather than rely on the unconvincing witness of apparitions, or those “rose from the dead,” to persuade his readers of Christianity, Richardson fashions sermon-replacing prose to teach the simple moral doctrines of “Moses and the prophets,” just as Young does in his sermon-replacing poetry: “Since Verse you think from Priestcraft somewhat free, / Thus, in an Age so gay, the Muse plain Truths / (Truths, which, at Church, you might have heard in Prose) / Has ventur’d into Light” (Night Thoughts VIII.1386-89). Despite working in disparate genres, these melancholic optimistic writers share aims, methods, and epistemological grounding for religion and the invisible realm. The result, in diegesis, is neither utter absence of spirits, nor direct confrontation with them. It is instead occultation-without-effacement—hiding spirits in the text but implying their continuing gravitational influence on the

____________________
did not go unnoticed by the English Newtonians, who now began to wonder if Cheyne was a scientist at all” (Rousseau 91).
narrative of material life. If spirits could no longer be made to impart knowledge of the invisible realm to the skeptic, for the converted their actions might still be inferred at the edges of plot.

These muted spiritual realms lend credence to skeptical readings of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Jesse Molesworth’s exploration of beliefs in the disenchanted magic of probability outliving supernatural thought is a convincing amendment to critical narratives about the inexorable march of rationality in the eighteenth-century. But those figures in the uncomfortable middle—the mainstream and avowedly non-occultic authors who seek to rectify an orthodox belief in invisible beings with an increasingly tenuous account of supernatural commerce—have not received sustained analysis as spirit-communicators. The difficulty is knowing where to look for spirits without direct demonological or angelological support, and Addison, the original graveyardist, provides clues in his correlation of the supernatural with melancholy.

Register of Change: Melancholy and Addisonian Ghost Stories

Melancholic optimism complicates scholarly models of the transformation from enchanted to demystified worldview early in the eighteenth century. Defoe might be accommodated in literary history as a late entry in Miltonic and Bunyanesque spiritual world-building (if unusual for working within material realism), but Addison disrupts neat classifications between rational and supernatural thinkers. He is in many ways a rational standard-bearer, yielding to empirical science the failure of the apparition-

44 One major exception being Samuel Johnson, whose unabated interest in ghosts has long been a source of fascination.
narrative project and working as hard as any Deist to disabuse readers of superstitious beliefs.

Yet, Addison’s spirits so haunt the Gothic novel that E.J. Clery launches *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* with Mr. Spectator’s uneasy examination of the rage for ghost stories among children in *Spectator* 12 (2-4). To Peter Walmsley, “*The Spectator*’s legacy to the gothic” is “a concerted discourse that draws together the supernatural, death, and melancholy,” and this spectral discourse “is as alive in Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* as it is in Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*” (217). But Clery and Walmsley focus on the fascination of the supernatural in the imagination—its psychological persistence despite its practical dismissal—without probing Addison’s deflected evidence of real spirits.

By the time Addison developed an optimistic response to the English malady, melancholy had already run a full career of natural and supernatural diagnosis. Throughout the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, melancholy’s most consistent symptom was depression without apparent cause, and this uncertainty left theologians and physicians caught up in the developing new science free to debate demonological versus physical influence.45 Was a melancholic demonically possessed, experiencing a deluding kind of enthusiasm, or merely physically ill? Robert Burton in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) attempted to harmonize this array but leaned on physical causes. He was willing to accept historical testimony for demonic and witchcraft-based sources of melancholy in his short subsections “A Digression of the Nature of Spirits, Bad Angels, or Devils, and how they cause Melancholy” and “Of Witches and

---

45 See Richard Terry 60-62 and Stanley Jackson 298, 316.
Magicians, how they cause Melancholy” (1st Partition, 180-206), and he credited the devil as “first mover of all superstition” (3rd Partition, 325), but as Michael Heyd notes, Burton emphasized “secondary causes” (69).

Such instrumental rather than spiritual treatment of melancholy (and its attendant, enthusiasm) continued to gain traction through the English Civil War, and even demonologists distanced melancholy from the supernatural. For Richard Baxter, “taken by many to be the Dissenting expert on the consolation and cure of religious melancholy, […] demonology [is] articulated on the level of theory and argument, not within the context of the practice of healing souls” (J. Schmidt 133). Similarly, Joseph Glanvill’s and Henry More’s “sustained interest in melancholy as the devil’s bath did not translate into the use of demonology as a therapeutic discourse,” even if it “suggested a point of weakness exploited by the devil” (134). The evidentiary weight of apparitions was placed instead on more extraordinary physical demonstrations, such as spitting nails.

This was not, however, disenchantment as Jeremy Schmidt’s reference to the devil’s bath demonstrates. Balneum diaboli, the devil’s bath, is where spiritual and physical forces meet in Burton’s account of the malady, and it is a very active location.

---

46 Enthusiasm stemming from melancholy was a “demonstrated threat to social order” (Rosenberg 472; cf. Irlam 23), but roundheads were not the only targets of criticism. As Daniel Fouke shows, “any portrait of the typical ‘enthusiasts’ never gets so far as a bare outline” because adherents of widely different political positions accused one another of exhibiting melancholic madness in order to discredit their positions (12). Adversaries did not discard supernatural implications entirely, but they were selective. Some were willing to identify the politically-charged crime of witchcraft as true Satanic power, for example, where others treated witches as sick melancholics and enthusiasm as the true demonic possession (Fouke 173).

47 Cf. Heyd 104-08. Even in his demonological Saducismus Triumphatus, Glanvill concedes to skeptics “that Melancholy and Imagination have very great force, and can beget strange persuasions. And that many Stories of Witchcraft and Apparitions have been but Melancholy fancies” (272).
Burton introduces the term when he describes a Mantuan doctor who cured a woman’s glossolalia “by purging black choler; and thereupon, belike, this humour of melancholy is called balneum diaboli, the devil’s bath; the devil spying his opportunity of such humours, drives them many times to despair, fury, rage, etc., mingling himself amongst these humours” (1st Partition, 200). Demonic manipulation via humors was spiritual, though it did not spell full possession of an individual: humors were “both instrument and opportunity for the operation of Satan,” but a person could presumably fight against their influence (Heyd 63). Following this hint, demonologists focused on the bath water itself rather than the demonic bather for practical therapy, because treating the body was directly verifiable and could serve the same end of frustrating the devil’s purposes.

Disenchantment grew with the increasing vogue of the disease, however. As hypochondria was wrapped into the discourse, melancholy became respectable and fashionable. In his 1711 *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions*, Bernard “Mandeville drew attention to hypochondria as a kind of pathological form of sociability,” because the “hypochondriac was an avatar, perhaps even an addict, not only of medicines, but also of medical discourse and conversation” (J. Schmidt 163, 161). Melancholy was thus also considered an intelligent person’s disease, a sign of greater sensibility and imagination, strengthening its traditional association with poetic

---

48 Cheyne estimates that nerve diseases affected as many as one third of the upper classes (*English Malady* ii). For a poetic vision of patients’ willingness to try all kinds of medicine to cure melancholy, see James Thomson’s *Castle of Indolence* (1748), canto 1, stanzas 75 and 76. Boswell quotes at length from this section in Number 5 of his *Hypochondriack* (139). Notably, Boswell in this same essay treats melancholy and hypochondria almost as synonyms (136).
enthusiasm.49 In this environment of sociable pathology, it might be hard to see the devil’s role as anything other than a convenient metaphor.

Yet, while Satanic diagnosis declined, supernatural rhetoric remained resonant in an era only recently emerging from demonological treatises and witchcraft trials.50 In Spectator 387 Addison claims that “Melancholy is a kind of Demon that haunts our Island” (3: 454). He does not dwell long on the demonic, but by arguing that providence gives natural beauty for man’s pleasure and quoting Locke to explain the theological purpose of hardship (that we might seek for “compleat Happiness” in God), Addison clearly identifies a lingering spiritual aspect to the disease (452, 454). His recourse to Locke is, like Cheyne’s appeal to Newton for the concept of spiritual gravity, another way in which “the medical language of hysteria and hypochondria could itself be both spiritualized and moralized” (J. Schmidt 163). Addison’s invocation of melancholy’s recently haunted past is not inert; he simply shifts focus to providential optimism while quoting modern scientists.

Addison accomplishes this shift by wresting the spiritual aspect of melancholy away from an esotericism that only drew ridicule upon the invisible realm. In Spectator 574, Addison’s narrator speaks with a Rosicrucian who claims he has “the great Secret”

49 Cf. John Baker 92. Evidence of the link between imagination and melancholy is legion. In a brief compendium of secondary sources, Terry quotes Felix Platter (60), James Thomson (71), and James Beattie (67); Anita Guerrini references a letter to Richardson in which Cheyne yokes their melancholic sufferings to “lively imagination” (123); Heyd points out the connection in Henry Wharton (197), Meric Casaubon (90), and Henry More (95-7).

50 Baker records such resonance in Anne Finch’s “The Spleen” (1709). Finch apostrophizes melancholy, ascribing it power to “possess” victims (43). The spleen therefore acts “as a maleficient, devious agent that appropriates people, takes them over” (Baker 92). The connection to an actual spiritual agent is still uncomfortably close, if not definitive.

59
in his possession, “a single Ray of [which] dissipates Pain, and Care, and Melancholy from the Person on whom it falls” (4: 562). But it turns out this “Secret” is really just a state of contentment—“no more than an everyday tenet of Christian morality” (Terry 63). Mr. Spectator, worried that readers might credit contentment to something other than Scripture and reason, warns at the outset that Rosicrucians “are over-run with Enthusiasm,” a symptom of melancholy itself (562). Their purported relief is therefore illusory: “there was never any System, besides that of Christianity, which could effectually produce in the Mind of Man the Virtue I have been hitherto speaking of” (565).

For Defoe, this “Mind of Man” is where the spiritual conversationalist distinguishes the promptings of spirits from fancies. For Addison, the mind of man should be engaged in introspection rather than communication. Whether demons or diet are ultimately at the bottom of melancholy, the Christian mind can render its darkness light by turning to godly thoughts. Thus the proper solution to the English malady is not exorcism or even the deep penitence of seventeenth-century Calvinists; it is something much more like calm reasoning, to “consider the World in its most agreeable Lights.” For Addison, “[r]esisting melancholy in effect becomes raised to the level of a moral duty” (Terry 64), and moral duty requires no supernatural speculation.

---

51 Addison, Spectator 387 (4: 454). Similarly, in Spectator 381 Addison adumbrates the sorrow-dispersing qualities of cheerfulness, a state of mind easily deprived by the consequences of vice and atheism but readily accessible to Christians who “live according to the Dictates of Virtue and right Reason” (4: 432). Peter Smithers finds a similar melancholic-optimistic note in the relationship between cheer and contemplation of life after death. If for Addison “it was thus comfortable, useful, and logical to believe in a creator, it was equally so to believe in an after life. A principal argument for such a belief was that it engendered cheerfulness” (442).
In fact, supernatural speculation could militate against moral duty. In *Spectator* 7, Addison’s narrator visits a home where the “whole Family [is] very much dejected” because the lady “had dreamt a very strange Dream,” which they fear portends evil (1: 31). He “observed a settled Melancholy in her Countenance” which is far from optimistic. As the dinner progresses Mr. Spectator takes on a supernatural cast as “the Stranger that was in the Candle last Night,” and when he accidentally spills the salt a little later, the table blanches; the “Reader may guess at the figure I made, after having done all this Mischief” (31, 32). The ghost problem here is all too physiological: self-generated fancy leads foolish people to read supernatural significance in merely accidental occurrences, a perfect illustration of Lockean association gone wild.52 Explaining how such association exacerbates the melancholic’s depression, Mr. Spectator uses language which resembles Defoe’s supernatural communications: “The Horrour with which we entertain the Thoughts of Death (or indeed of any future Evil) and the Uncertainty of its Approach, fill a melancholy Mind with innumerable Apprehensions and Suspicions, and consequently dispose it to the Observation of such groundless Prodigies and Predictions” (34). The problem can be seen in its effects—in this case, inhospitality. The consequences could be worse. Mr. Spectator recalls how a friend attended a dinner party at which a comment about the number of guests being thirteen “struck a pannick Terror” (33). The evening was saved when this friend noted a woman was pregnant, so that thirteen became a portent of birth rather than death. “Had not my Friend found this Expedient to break the Omen, I question not but half the Women in the

52 Cf. Walmsley 207
Company would have fallen sick that very Night” (34). Superstition could produce very physical effects.

Addison’s criticism is doubly-damning because it renders credulity not only ridiculous and dangerous, but also feminine. It anticipates the eighteenth-century critique of realist fiction as such, especially in its more sentimental forms. Addison writes, “superstitious Follies of Mankind[…] subject us to imaginary Afflictions, and additional Sorrows that do not properly come with our Lot,” to the point that we “suffer as much from trifling Accidents, as from real Evils” (33). The novel with its own “imaginary Afflictions” raises prognostics in order to lay them through the manipulation of plot, and the exercise could easily be taken too far, especially, it was argued, by women. Authors, “whenever the Course of their Story required an Expedient, raised a gloomy Forest” (378), explains the wise clergyman in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) as he tries to reason Arabella out of her belief in the reality of romances. “It is the Fault of the best Fictions, that they teach young Minds to expect strange Adventures and sudden Vicissitudes, and therefore encourage them often to trust to Chance” (379). Fictional plots should not teach trust in chance (or, by implication, supernatural omens), but providence: “An admirable Writer of our own Time, has found the Way to convey the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel” (377). (The pious writer and pleasing novel are, according to Lennox’s footnote, Samuel Richardson and *Clarissa*.)

Lennox’s “young Minds” taught “to expect strange Adventures” appear in *Spectator* 12 alongside women as subjects particularly liable to the narrative thrall of superstition. In search of new lodgings, Mr. Spectator rents a room where he can blend
into the background, and he soon overhears his landlady’s children “telling Stories of Spirits and Apparitions” (1: 53), an entertainment he immediately criticizes for its (anticipated) consequences: “they talked so long, that the Imaginations of the whole Assembly were manifestly crazed, and I am sure will be the worse for it as long as they live” (53-4). Addison again channels Locke, not just for the association of ideas, but for its specific role as accelerant of superstition and ghost stories. In Spectator 110, he quotes the pertinent passage from An Essay Concerning Human Understanding:

The Ideas of Goblines and Sprights have really no more to do with Darkness than Light; yet let but a foolish Maid inculcate these often on the Mind of a Child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives, but Darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful Ideas, and they shall be so joined that he can no more bear the one than the other. (Locke, An Essay 397-8, qtd. in Spectator 1: 454)

Associative thinking generates automatic, irrational responses in young and female minds, strengthening the opposition between superstition and morality.

The joke turns on Mr. Spectator, however, when a girl notices him in the corner and asks her group whether he looked more pale than usual. “This put me under some Apprehensions that I should be forced to explain my self if I did not retire” (54). The children may be reading their own fearfulness into Mr. Spectator, but considering that he experiences “Apprehensions”—a key supernaturalist term—he may have looked paler because, like the children, he is spooked, “a suggestion of identification” (Clery 3). Does Mr. Spectator have a melancholic and effeminate imagination himself? He can certainly
recall, in detail, the children’s “dreadful Stories of Ghosts as pale as Ashes that had stood at the Feet of a Bed, or walked over a Church-yard by Moon-light[, …] with many other old Womens Fables” (53). No wonder he sounds defensive when he later says, “I look upon a sound Imagination as the greatest Blessing of Life” (54).

The entire issue playfully pokes at Mr. Spectator’s wish to exonerate himself from the suspicion of being a credulous, unmanly melancholic. He searches for new lodgings in the first place because his old landlord kept breaking his solitude, “afraid I was melancholy” (52). After Mr. Spectator leaves, this landlord goes so far as to take out an advertisement in *The Daily Courant*, asking for information on “a melancholy Man,” no name given, who was last “seen going towards Islington” (52). The setup is meant to be ridiculous as Addison seems to dismantle belief through Shaftesburian humor, but Mr. Spectator is not just a vehicle for satire. He is also a case study in lingering credulity that refuses classification as childish and feminine:

if we believe, as many wise and good Men have done, that there are such Phantoms and Apparitions as those I have been speaking of, let us endeavour to establish to our selves an Interest in him who holds the Reins of the whole Creation in his Hand, and moderates them after such a Manner, that it is impossible for one Being to break loose upon another without his Knowledge and Permission. (54)

---

53 In the *Characteristics* (1711), Shaftesbury famously promotes ridicule as a test of truth, especially in supernatural matters (13, 59).
Belief in spiritual beings need not be hysterical and unmanly; contemplating providence in the manner of “wise and good Men” will prevent prognostics from inflaming the imagination and exacerbating melancholy.

On these grounds, Mr. Spectator feels free to assert, “I am apt to join in Opinion with those who believe that all the Regions of Nature swarm with Spirits; and that we have Multitudes of Spectators on all our Actions, when we think our selves most alone” (54). His literary-theological source for this opinion is Milton—Mr. Spectator concludes the issue by quoting fourteen lines from Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* (1667), starting with Adam’s explanation to Eve, “Nor think, though Men were none, / That Heav’n would want Spectators, God want praise” (qtd. 55). Spirits are thus preserved, but as a source of encouragement. Rather than whisper specific danger, they act as an externalized conscience, watching over “all our Actions, when we think our selves most alone.”

Far from skeptical, Mr. Spectator glories in the idea that he joins with this “innumerable Society” in inspecting the world. Amid the “Multitudes of Spectators” he himself is the “Mr. Spectator,” as invisible and active a force in London life as spirits. Their very mode of spectrality characterizes Mr. Spectator’s own haunting through print culture. He inserts himself into London social life, recounting conversations in parlours and coffee shops, and responding to reader commentary. Since he is a composite creation of multiple authors, Mr. Spectator inhabits multiple places at once, and in another sense, none at all. “Spectator and specter are thoroughly blurred,” writes Walmsley. “Mr. Spectator clearly watches us intently, sharing with the dead the task of monitoring our daily lives” (211).
Across *The Spectator*, then, Addison entertains multiple stances toward the invisible realm. In one sense superstitious beliefs are foolish, even harmful, the result of an over-active melancholic imagination exploding the association of ideas beyond reason. This version of the supernatural is the province of old ladies, young children, and unthinking individuals of all ages, a familiar cast of usual suspects throughout the eighteenth century and ripe for satire. *Spectators* 7, 12, and 110 rehearse this critique. In another sense, however, the supernatural is not only irresistible, but when not taken to extremes, a sign of healthy imagination: “there is nothing which delights and terrifies our English Theatre so much as a Ghost, […] and when they only come in as Aids and Assistances to the Poet, they are not only to be excused, but to be applauded” (1: 186). This is the theme of the series on *Pleasures of the Imagination* (*Spectators* 411-421) and *Spectator* 44. In yet another sense, belief in the supernatural is upgraded to wise philosophy, a position that Mr. Spectator advocates in the same essays that ridicule credulity (*Spectators* 12 and 110). One who fears ghosts is “much more reasonable, than one who contrary to the Reports of all Historians sacred and prophane, ancient and modern, and to the Traditions of all Nations, thinks the Appearance of Spirits fabulous and groundless” (1: 455). And hovering above all these reactions to the visible realm is the ghostly reality of Mr. Spectator himself.

Addison carefully balances the variant attitudes. The apparitions he supports theoretically he never portrays within his own realistic narratives, and when he addresses melancholy, he always invokes God, not spirits, as antidote.⁵⁴ Addison does not discount entirely the possibility of portraying believable spirits, however. In *Spectator* 110, for

---

⁵⁴ Cf. Walmsley 212.
example, he quotes a portentous dream from *Josephus* for pedagogic reasons: “I shall dismiss this Paper with a Story out of *Josephus*, not so much for the Sake of the Story itself, as for the moral Reflections with which the Author concludes it” (1: 455). The story is proof of the immortality of the soul, so doubters should not “disturb the Belief of others, who by Instances of this Nature are excited to the Study of Virtue,” a rare rapprochement between supernatural speculation and morality (456). It recalls Defoe’s determination in *A System of Magick* that a properly developed supernatural “Story is of the same Use, whether one Word of the Fact be true or no” (128).

*Spectator* 110 is more a concession to the supernatural “Reports of all Historians sacred and prophane” than a call for modern dream-reading, however. In his famous essay on “the Fairy Way of Writing” (*Spectator* 419), Addison clarifies the relationship between a real invisible realm and a literary one:

> Men of cold Fancies, and Philosophical Dispositions, object to 
> [supernatural] Poetry, that it has not Probability enough to affect the 
> Imagination. But to this it may be answered, that we are sure, in general, 
> there are many Intellectual Beings in the World besides our selves, and 
> several Species of Spirits, who are subject to different Laws and 
> Oeconomies from those of Mankind; when we see, therefore, any of these 
> represented naturally, we cannot look upon the Representation as 
> altogether impossible; [..] (3: 571)

Spirits are “represented naturally” not according to empirical proof, but English imagination. Shakespeare is the exemplar whose ghost stories are so consonant with the “Gloominess and Melancholly of Temper, which is so frequent in our Nation,” that “tho’
we have no Rule by which to judge of them, [we] must confess, if there are such Beings in the World, it looks highly probable they should talk and act as he has represented them” (572, 573). Probability again is not empirical but psychological: many English readers “are prepossessed with such false Opinions, as dispose them to believe these particular Delusions; [... so] that we do not care for seeing through the Falsehood, and willingly give our selves up to so agreeable an Imposture” (571-72).

If Defoe proposes that unverified ghost stories can illustrate the workings of the “real” invisible realm, Addison argues that they only ever support an imagined one, no matter how realistic. Nevertheless, a real invisible realm inspires the imagination because the “particular delusions” of fiction do not refute Addison’s belief that “in general, there are many Intellectual Beings in the World besides our selves.” Spirits, rather than a mere psychological effect, must form the substratum for literary ghosts; the narrative superstructure simply has no definite link with it. The appeal of a ghost story “depends on the Poet’s Fancy, because he has no Pattern to follow in it” (570), rendering ghosts problematic for the fiction of everyday life—but if the pattern is lacking, the cloth is not.

Within this configuration, Addison’s declaration that apparition chasers are foolish but apparition skeptics more foolish presents no contradiction. His play The Drummer; or, the Haunted-House (1716)—a comedy which invokes Glanvill’s most famous apparition narrative, the ghostly drummer of Tedworth—appears to lampoon the credulous by developing the plot on the impersonation of a ghost. Set in a realistic, modern locale, the story rationalizes the mysteries that enthralled demonologists. Empirical evidence such as knocking on walls is an elaborate ruse. The most trepidatious believers are class-tagged—servants who need strong drink to face down their fears—but
they are not alone. Just about everyone who is not in on the impersonation, including noble heroine Lady Truman, is spooked. The only outright skeptic is an atheist, Tinsell, whose disbelief is disproven when the “ghost” appears to him. “He rush’d out of the House, call’d for his Horse, clap’d Spurs to his sides, and was out of sight in less time, than I—can—tell—ten,” says Vellum, the steward.\textsuperscript{55} The scene confirms the psychological effect of haunting, even for the non-believer. The play as a whole satirizes this credulity, but Addison’s rather straightforward moral against atheism suggests a more measured response to the invisible realm than simple skepticism or belief. Tinsell’s biggest sin is not the hypocrisy of secret superstitious fear, but his cavalier dismissal of the bare possibility of an active invisible realm. \textit{The Drummer} affirms that one should be wary about apparition belief, but should not not-believe in spirits either, a supernatural apologetic through litotes.

Addison’s double-negative apparition theory is neither Defoe’s, Richardson’s, Fielding’s, Walpole’s, nor Radcliffe’s, though he hints at all five. The closest to Addison might be Samuel Johnson, who shared his simultaneous belief and wariness. In \textit{Rambler} 4 Johnson argues that when a fictional character “acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man; young spectators fix their eyes upon him with closer attention, and hope by observing his behaviour and success to regulate their own practices” (1: 21). The only spirits visibly operating in the “universal drama” were, as far as Johnson could determine, frauds, mental projections, or at best, ghosts of hearsay. There was too little behavior to observe for the purpose of regulating one’s own practices.

\textsuperscript{55} Act 5, page 480.
Addison seeks, through fiction, to educate in “the universal drama,” and for similar ends. In *Spectator* 12, the children who nearly sicken each other with tales of ghosts are an apt illustration of Johnson’s concern that “the power of example is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will” (*Rambler* 1: 22). Modern ghost stories may be imaginative, poetic, and even pleasing when they fit gloomy English expectations of how ghosts might behave, but as for educating in the universal drama, there was “no Pattern to follow in it.” Spiritual influence should come only through resignation to God, an action with plentiful examples for patterning. Addison himself would become prime example through his death. He showed “in what peace a Christian can die,” thereby emphasizing the advantages of rational Christian optimism, even on the verge of meeting invisible beings (qtd. in Young, *Conjectures* 102). Addison’s answer to the problem of balancing belief in spirits with the difficulty of representation was simply to render angels and apparitions unnecessary. The potential for theological and moral damage outweighed any apologetics benefit.

Addison most clearly demonstrates the negative real-world implications of superstitious belief in *Spectator* 117, through an examination of witchcraft.56 He disapproves of action against so-called witches but will not be pinned down as a thoroughgoing nay-sayer: “THERE are some Opinions in which a Man should stand Neuter, without engaging his Assent to one side or the other. Such a hovering Faith as this, which refuses to settle upon any Determination, is absolutely necessary in a Mind

56 A topic that was still controversial. In the following year, 1712, Jane Wenham was indicted—and subsequently exonerated—in one of the last major English witchcraft trials.
that is careful to avoid Errors and Prepossessions” (1: 479). This same hovering faith animated Johnson’s pride in exposing the Cock Lane Ghost (even though it laid open for ridicule his own general credulity). Addison continues, “I endeavour to suspend my Belief till I hear more certain Accounts than any which have yet come to my Knowledge,” which is to say he will suspend his belief indefinitely (480). The formulation is an uncanny anticipation of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” for supernatural literature, in which Coleridge grants a work “poetic faith” by submitting reason and doubts to the logic of the story world (Biographia 6). It is a kind of medium ground between belief and skepticism.

Coleridge and Addison start at different places, however. Coleridge suspends disbelief to participate in hauntings. Asked once if he believed in apparitions, he replied, “No, Madam! I have seen far too many myself” (The Friend 146). There is no doubt of their reality; Coleridge refuses “the question of belief altogether with his assertion of true, simple seeing” (Wolfson 765). Addison, on the other hand, suspends his prepossession to belief in order to critique supernatural stories impartially, in order not to give himself up to the logic of the storyteller. He is just as haunted as Coleridge, as Mr. Spectator’s automatic blanching at the children’s ghost stories in Spectator 12 suggests, but since he is here addressing the nature of supernatural evidence directly, he must interject doubts for the sake of impartiality.

Like Coleridge, Addison adverts to the very prevalence of supernatural experience as proof of its largely psychological rather than literal character: “When an old Woman begins to doat, and grow chargeable to a Parish, she is generally turned into a Witch, and fills the whole Country with extravagant Fancies, imaginary Distempers, and
terrifying Dreams” (1: 482). This is about as real and universal a supernatural experience one could ask for, but its connection to a literal invisible realm was spurious and its example of behavior pernicious. Addison had to look elsewhere for proof of “real” supernatural intervention, and this presented a difficulty: “I believe in general that there is and has been such a thing as Witch-craft; but at the same time can give no Credit to any Particular Instance of it” (480), a sentiment so influential that Blackstone quotes it as wisdom from “an ingenious writer of our own,” supporting the legal position “that no prosecution shall for the future be carried on against any person for conjuration, witchcraft, sorcery, or enchantment” (60, 61).

The evidence which once would have convinced a jury was no longer allowed in the courtroom, and the testimony which once “proved” the existence of invisible beings in apparition narratives was not acceptable in realistic stories. The behavior that Addison presents for emulation in Spectator 117 is not belief, but skepticism. Yet for Addison (and Blackstone), God’s word and history argue that witchcraft must be possible. The solution, therefore, was the strategy supplied by The Drummer: deflecting supernatural evidence through litotes, through not not-believing. It is a method which George Cheyne adapts into scientific terms, and which animates the optimism of certain graveyard poets’ melancholy.

George Cheyne, Graveyard Poetry, and Melancholic Optimism

Shortly after The Spectator ended publication, George Cheyne printed Philosophical Principles of Religion (1715), a monograph that takes an Addisonian prescription for cheerful mental disposition and turns it into a wider cosmological
principle. Cheyne invokes Isaac Newton to argue that God has implanted “Attraction or Gravitation” in all created things, which persists “by virtue of the Omnipotent Activity” (40-41). More than simple gravitation between physical bodies, attraction is also a spiritual force: “God could not make spiritual Creatures, but he must implant the Principle of Re-union in them, in order to bring them back to himself, that is, to make them happy: This is the Origin of Natural Probity and Conscience” (48). Cheyne revitalizes melancholy as spiritual disease by pitting negative decision-making (a way of resisting spiritual gravity) against providential design and situating his theory within modern scientific and philosophical paradigms.

Cheyne’s prescription in The English Malady (1733) was physical rather than spiritual, however—the moderate chastening of vegetable diet and exercise, which augured a more meliorative plot than the soul-harrowing of seventeenth-century spiritual melancholy: “unlike the Puritan perception of illness as something to be endured, Cheyne’s narratives […] offered the prospect of recovery” (Guerrini 150). Like Addison’s cheerful resignation to God, Cheyne’s dietary melancholic optimism conferred alleviation in the here and now while also providing access to the heavenly realm. Just as God’s “RULES of preserving LIFE and HEALTH are moral Duties commanded us, so

57 God is active, if not necessarily intrusive. “Because God initially impressed this force [attraction] on matter, the universe and its motion were therefore sustained without the continued interference of God; Cheyne strongly opposed the notion of “occasionalism,” which claimed that God continued to intervene” (Guerrini 75). Hence, Cheyne ruled out miraculous intervention except for extraordinary occasions.

58 The “conception of a unifying analogy evident throughout the universe was be no means peculiar to Cheyne,” notes Geoffrey Bowles, who finds similar formulations, with God as “Center,” in John Norris of Bemerton, the metaphysician whom E. Derek Taylor identifies as one of Richardson’s most important theological influences (487, 488). For Cheyne’s close connection with mystical and enthusiastic thinkers, see G.S. Rousseau; for Cheyne’s spirituality in relation to Richardson’s, see Hensley 135-36.
true it is, that *Godliness has the Promises of this Life, as well as that to come*” (An Essay 5, qtd. in Guerrini 122). Cheyne’s physical remedy is not a repudiation of melancholy’s spiritual aspects but is part of the spiritual cure, warranted by Old Testament moral and dietary law.

Cheyne believed invisible agents were involved too, but stopped short of portraying them. In *Philosophical Principles* he warns against spiritual “Agency, without plain Necessity,” even though he defends “the Administration of *Subordinate Spirits* in the *All-Wise’s* Government of the World” (4). This tension plays out in the major narrative section of *The English Malady*, in which Cheyne records his own battle with diet and melancholy as his body swelled to over 400 pounds. It is spiritual autobiography, a story of repentance, back sliding, and the return to proper principles, but it is not supernatural. At the very end, however, from the perspective of recovery, Cheyne gives thanks to God, who “by mere *casual Hints*, far beyond the Reach of my *Penetration*, has irresistibly (as I should almost say, if I felt not my own *Liberty*) directed the great Steps of my *Life* and *Health* hitherto” (251). Casual hints, the counterweight to material temptations, imply Defoevian spiritual agents, but Cheyne remains evasive about their operation. He is certain of their influence, but since they remain beyond penetration he refuses to include them within diegesis. This is Addisonian occultation-without-effacement of the invisible realm: though spiritual representation is impracticable, it is

---

59 See Cheyne’s earlier gravitational articulation of this idea in *Philosophical Principles* 48-50.

60 Guerrini 8. See also 149: “I suggest[…] that a pervasive sense of sin underlies Cheyne’s discussion, culminating in his autobiography.”
best not to not-believe that invisible agents are involved, even in a narrative of medical cures.

Graveyard poets—Edward Young especially, but also Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, and prose-graveyardist James Hervey—provided fertile ground for this evasive tactic of melancholic optimism. Their paradoxes and Platonic inversions toggle between earthly and spiritual registers, knocking the reader off center in order to establish a new one. While optimism may not seem evident, at least superficially, more than a few graveyardists expressed pleasure and celebrated reason over superstition as they mobilized their melancholic aesthetic for a higher function.61 The invisible realm remained a vexed topic, but spiritual hints are detectable beneath the sepulchral gloom and satiric superstition.

Young’s The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality (1742-1746), published just before Richardson’s Clarissa (1747-48), strikes a dark tone as the poet contemplates death while trying to convert an “infidel,” Lorenzo, to Christianity. Cecil Moore sees the conversion work as a “screen for morbid emotionalism” (232), and some of Young’s contemporaries agreed. In 1754, the Irish bricklayer-poet Henry Jones published The Relief; or, Day Thoughts: A Poem. Occasioned by the Complaint, or Night Thoughts, which seems a deliberate misreading

---

61 In 1932, Eleanor Sickels described a “white melancholy” which poets invoked “not to bid […] hence,” but to enjoy as “a sort of contemplative ‘joy in grief’[…] Such epithets and phrases as ‘sadly-soothing,’ ‘sweetly-sad,’ ‘mournful joy,’ ‘sadly-pleasing,’ ‘gloomy joy,’ ‘sad luxury of woe,’ occur and recur” (48). More recently, Kevin Cope and Jan van Leeuwen have probed the positive connotations in the melancholic graveyard poets’ use of oxymoron and paradox, and Cornford, in his critical edition of Night Thoughts, seeks to rescue Edward Young from the interpretations of “a secular cult of sepulchral melancholy” that had misappropriated Young in the late eighteenth century (17-18).
and conflation of Young with more sensational graveyard poets: “hideous Melancholy
dips / Her Pencil, still, in dark delusive Tincts, / And paints the Face of Things; detested Groupe! / A Landskip fit for Hell” (page 5). Gloom for Young, however, is actually the screen for greater ultimate happiness, a dynamic James Boswell registers in his Hypochondriack essays. Lamenting the awfulness of fear in the melancholic mind, Boswell quotes Night Thoughts as consolation, “both with respect to our concerns in this world, and those in the world beyond the grave. I would not indulge the thought of death to excess; but as Dr. Young counsels us, would ‘Give it its wholesome empire’” (216). This is a form of Dr. Cheyne’s “wholesome” diet—mental milk and vegetables.

Young injects optimism by turning nocturnal blackness into a truer kind of light than the light of day. “By [stars] best lighted are the Paths of Thought; / Nights are their Days, their most illumin’d Hours” (V.113-14). In a Neoplatonic move, he reverses “the usual dichotomy between the physical and spiritual state”: earthly existence is “insubstantial,” and darkness is no Gothic terror but a medium to truer reality (van Leeuwen 362).62

Let Indians, and the Gay, like Indians, fond

Of feather’d Fopperies, the Sun adore:

Darkness has more Divinity for me;

It strikes Thought inward, it drives back the Soul

To settle on Herself, our Point supreme!

(V.126-30)

---

62 Fred Botting sees in Young’s darkness even an apotheosis—“it expands the mind by producing a consciousness of its own potential for divinity” (34).
Indians and blithe men of “feather’d Fopperies”—subjects at the periphery and at the heart of the British empire, a wide net for critique—worship a solar light of delusive brilliance rather than “the Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4.2). By contrast, Young’s darkness is godly; not a stage for superstition, vice, or enervating melancholy, but a stage of reasoning fitted for the universal drama of life, a “Curtain drop[ped] o’er Life’s dull Scene” (V.132)

This revitalized darkness redeems, most of all, death itself. Young had seen his share and felt it deeply. The three deceased loved ones in Night Thoughts, Lucia, Narcissa, and Philander, are not only allegorical; they are avatars for Young’s wife, step-daughter, and son-in-law, all of whom died within a space of about five years. Yet, Young’s narrator repeatedly exhorts Lorenzo to embrace rather than shun “the thought of death”: “Dost ask Lorenzo, why so warmly prest, / By Repetition hammer’d on thine Ear, / The Thought of Death?” (V.682-84). A friend’s death, he explains in Night Three, serves to “abate / That Glare of Life, which often blinds the Wise” (278-79). The logic of true illumination is clear, and it beams the antidote to melancholy which Boswell discovered:

the Thought of Death indulge;
Give it its wholesome Empire! let It reign,
That Kind Chastiser of thy Soul in Joy!
Its reign will spread thy glorious Conquests far,

63 Cornford extends this sadness to mankind in general: “The ‘Occasion’ of Night Thoughts was as much the preacher’s sadness at the sight of unthinking men racing unawares to death, as the poet’s sadness at the loss of friends” (19).
64 The phrase “the thought of death” sounds ten times, at least, in Night Thoughts.
And still the Tumults of thy ruffled breast;
Auspicious Æra! Golden Days, begin!
The Thought of Death, shall, like a God, inspire.

(III.303-09)

The “Chastiser of thy Soul” is not the demonic inflictor of melancholy, but the “wholsome” remedy of melancholic optimism. When death thoughts are embraced as indulgence, when chastisement is kind, and when submission is conquest, melancholy can turn to peace and contentment—a striking rendering of Addison’s resigned providential contemplation.

This “Consolation,” the title of Young’s conclusion, is available in the here as well as the hereafter, through Scripture’s assurance of God’s union with mankind in Christ:

WHAT Words are these – And did they come from Heav’n?
[… They h]eal, and exhilarate, the broken Heart,
Tho’ plung’d, before, in Horrors dark as Night.
Rich Prelibration of consummate Joy!
Nor wait we Dissolution to be blest.

(IX.2365, 2370-73)

With this consummation at hand, the narrator bids farewell to night and welcome to “eternal day” (2379). The inversion is complete; darkness has led to the true light. Conjoined are “The Two Supports of Human Happiness, / Which some, erroneous, think can never meet; / True Taste of Life, and constant Thought of Death” (2383-85). The key is the last line’s two adjectives: “True taste of life” distances the reader from the appetite
of false and unsavory life-tasters, namely chasers after vice, while the “constant thought of death” suggests a sincere respect for the amending effect of death thoughts, not Moore’s “morbid emotionalism.”

James Hervey plays this key when he echoes Young nearly verbatim in *Meditations and Contemplations* (1746-47; 4th ed. 1748). Looking upon ourselves as “Tenants at Will” on earth is the healthiest disposition, he argues, since it brings with it “Chearfulness of Temper”: “So, just so, or rather by a much surer Band, are connected the real Taste of Life, and the constant Thought of Death” (1: 31). Hervey, however, is not just a mimic of Young—substituting only “real” for Young’s “true” taste—but also an orchestrator of mid-century melancholic-optimistic voices. He combines the graveyard consolations of *Night Thoughts* with the scientific plot of Cheyne’s spiritual attraction. In his description of the frontispiece to the second volume of the fourth edition of *Meditations*, which depicts centrifugal and centripetal forces, Hervey writes:

> as by the One, the Planets are continually endeavouring to fly off; but by the other, are perpetually drawn towards the Centre of their Motion, SIC GRATIA DEI, Such is the Operation of Divine Grace: correcting the irregular Impulse of our natural Depravity: determining our Desires to the Centre of Happiness, and directing our Goings in the Circle of Duty. (iv)

The graph paper upon which these cosmological—and now moral—forces are depicted rests on none other than a book titled “Newton.” The graph paper itself is labeled “Enarrant Gloriam DEI,” a fragment from Psalm 19.1: “The heavens declare the glory of God.”65 The subject, *caeli*, is omitted, suggesting that the various pictorial

---

65 Psalm 18.2 in the Vulgate numbering.
representations of the Newtonian universe supply the place of “heavens.” The new science does not disenchant; it shows forth God’s glory. Both Cheyne and Hervey present, by means of modern scientific analogy, a narrative trajectory as well as a cosmology—an invisible force directs a person’s life toward happiness once he frees himself from “irregular Impulse.” This is not divine fiat but a personal plot-driving choice against error, and night thoughts provide the means of liberation.

Contemporary readers grasped this story of melancholic optimism. Young’s step-daughter Caroline Lee suffered from the English malady, and in a letter to Richardson, Young reports that a “disorder hangs chiefly on her spirits; and she told me, after she had dipt into your book [Hervey’s Meditations, which Richardson printed], that she fancied flowers and tombs were (though seeming so remote) as near in nature, as in that author’s composition” (Young, The Correspondence 226). Young refers to the second work in Hervey’s Meditations, “Reflections on a Flower-Garden,” which takes the transience of floral beauty from melancholy territory into positive theology: “How often have I felt [flowers] dissipate the Gloom of Thought, and transfuse a sudden Gaiety thro’ the dejected Spirit!” (1: 165). This transformation, in turn, hints at the greater “unknown Delight, to enter into thy immediate Presence, most Blessed Lord God!” (166). Caroline Lee’s recognition of conformity “in nature” between the “transporting Pleasure” of flowers and death goes to the heart of melancholic optimism, which defines nature not merely as physical world, but as invisible world too.66

---

66 In Night Thoughts, writes Merrill Whitburn, the narrator and Lorenzo share the premise “that man should accept the rhetorical influence of nature,” but Lorenzo takes nature in its fallen sense, as an impetus for action toward “earthly pleasure,” while the narrator argues it is “designed to move man to the otherworldly” (166). Cf. also Shaun Irlam: “For Young, words like ‘Nature,’ ‘Sense,’ ‘Reason,’ ‘Life,’ and ‘Death’ are all found to have a
Samuel Richardson’s close epistolary friend Lady Bradshaigh felt the same cure, though she tells Richardson that she “accompanied” Hervey “with much greater pleasure among the Tombs, than in his Flower Garden, not however without some horror, though, at the same time, I felt a gloomy delight, and was greatly moved at some of his descriptions” (qtd. in Richardson, The Correspondence 7). Lady Bradshaigh’s language of emotional response to funereal description resembles the rhetoric of emotional and atmospheric graveyard poetics that will become the hallmark of the Gothic, but her “gloomy delight” retains a Youngian paradoxical tension. Delight “among the Tombs” comes in spite of horror, not because of it, suggesting it is a proper amending pleasure.

With death cued up as optimistic source of contemplation and ultimate reprieve for the melancholic, readers might expect the story of death’s invisible inhabitants in these works, but like Addison and Cheyne, Young and Hervey are guarded. Night Thoughts avoids direct engagement with the topic, though Young is more forthright in his sermon, A Vindication of Providence (1728). He invests happiness with theological value, deploring the human frailties, including melancholy, that lead people to judge the earth “by God’s Appointment, a World of Sorrow, a Scene of Misery, a Vale of Tears; and that to Be in it, is to Be wretched unavoidably.” Young endeavors instead to show that God does permit, enable, and “enjoyn us to be Happy; Happy, to a much greater Degree than we are, That is, than we chuse to be.” The method he gives is Colossians

[...] self-different structure on account of their operating, sometimes utterly antithetically, within both mundane and transcendental registers” (196).

67 Cope finds Night Thoughts highly suggestive about invisible beings, but of the human kind. “Space for Young is a kind of inverted grave filled with vast throngs of people who just happen to be resident in invisible places, whether in charnel houses or somewhere in the deep vault of the heavens” (175).

68 This and the following quotation are from the unpaginated dedication to the queen.
3.2—“Set your Affections on Things above, and not on Things on the Earth” (qtd. 1). These things above include the consolation of night thoughts, but expand also to “the beatifick Vision of God, the Presence of Christ, the Conversation of Angels” (3). The list is suggestive of a range of spiritual interventions, from the weekly presence of Christ in the sacrament, to enthusiasm, to Defoevian hints, but Young unfortunately missed his opportunity to elaborate—*Vindication* was to be a two-part treatise, and the second installment, detailing sources of true happiness, was never written.

Young does consider the role of demons in everyday life, however, and they are sufficient to prove that man is subject to spiritual communications. The evidence is our vulnerable imaginations: the devil’s “Manner of working is by forming Images, or exciting Motions there, which become the immediate Matter of our Thought” (5-6). In language that echoes Burton’s hidden spiritual etiology of melancholy, Young places the devil’s operations in the same faculty that Defoe identifies as the location of spiritual communications. Imagination is also a counterforce, however, the very mechanism for transformative night thoughts. The cure for melancholy, then, is not exorcising the devil but exercising the mind with contemplations that will crowd out Satan’s fanciful suggestions. Young, like Burton, Addison, and Cheyne, presents an enchanted world, but one which need not reveal its spiritual cosmology in the author’s development of soteriological and optimistic plots.

Hervey goes further in conjuring *The Spectator* for his own noncommittal imagination of angelic agency: “PERHAPS, there may be Numbers of those invisible Beings, patrolling this same Retreat; and joining with me, in contemplating the Creator’s Works” (2: 13). If so, it is an awe-inspiring thought, but Hervey channels Addison’s
“multitudes of spectators” to shift focus away from individual messengers to providence: “‘TIS possible, that I am encompassed with such a Cloud of Witnesses; but it is certain, that GOD, the infinite and eternal GOD, is ever with me” (2: 14). In the calculus of probabilities, the question of invisible witnesses fades before God’s eternal witness, so why worry about apparitions?69

Hervey is comfortable, therefore, with deflecting evidence of real spirits and laughing at the credulity of stock apprehensive characters who produce addled night thoughts: “Now, melancholy Spectres visit the Ruins of ancient Monasteries, and frequent the solitary Dwellings of the Dead” (2: 51). Such a childish graveyard narrative is rooted again in Lockean association: “How often has the School-Boy fetched a long Circuit, and trudged many a needless Step, in order to avoid the haunted Church-yard? […] A] thousand hideous Stories rush into his Memory: Fear adds Wings to his Feet: he scarce touches the Ground.” Adults who cannot shake off the same credulity become the comic butt of The Drummer, but more importantly, they risk becoming its negative theological example. Hervey has no patience for those “who are startled, in any dark and lonely Walk, at the very Apprehension of a single Spectre,” but are “unimpressed at the sure Prospect, of entering into a whole World of disembodied Beings” (51-52). When that telling “apprehension” of something supernatural absorbs all attention in spiritual matters, it poses deadly theological risks.

69 As Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, “Hervey explains that timid people are frightened of ‘imaginary Horrors of the Night’ when they should be afraid of God,” though she too is careful to note that “the conclusion of his argument is not that one should disbelieve in apparitions—their reality is, after all, he points out, attested by the Book of Job. It is, specifically, a mistake to assume that ghosts can appear for trivial reasons” (The Insistence 25).
Hervey’s cited source for the story of the boy running through a graveyard is Robert Blair, whose more direct treatment of supernatural subjects in *The Grave* (1743) clarifies the role of invisible agency in melancholic-optimistic narratives. Blair offers a traditionally Gothic graveyard, with vault walls “Furr’d round with mouldy Damps, and ropy Slime” (18), but like Hervey, he drains the Gothic of its terror by putting “light-heel’d Ghosts, and visionary Shades” in their place as phantoms whose existence is never empirically verified (24). They are evidence only of what “Fame reports” or what “the Neighbours say” (25, 50), not the narrator’s own witness. What at first looks like a proto-Gothic poem resolves into a down-to-earth empirical accounting of the cemetery, so that by the time Blair’s narrator gets to the story of a boy running through the churchyard, it is nearly comedy: the child whistles, grows disconcerted, and then takes off at something he “hears, or thinks he hears,” eventually puffing up the terror into a wild story for his friends (63).

Such superstition is dangerous because it produces a faulty view of death. Death, while dreadful in a sense—“A gloomy Path! / Made yet more gloomy by our Coward Fears!”—should in the end be “Thrice welcome” (688-9, 706), and spirits exert no demonstrable agency on this path:

Tell us! ye Dead! Will none of you in Pity
To those you left behind disclose the Secret?
Oh! that some courteous Ghost would blab it out!
What ’tis You are, and We must shortly be.

---

70 See Jan van Leeuwen 363-64 on this distance between speaker and spectator as didactic ploy.
Sullen, like Lamps in Sepulchres, your Shine
Enlightens but yourselves: Well,---'tis no Matter;
A very little Time will clear up all,
And make us learn'd as you are, and as close.” (431-34, 443-46)

With a dose of satire at “blabbing” ghosts, Blair’s answer to the question of spirits is to throw up his hands and let them live to themselves, because they ultimately have no great bearing on man’s relationship to the creator. It is “no Matter.” The silence of the dead is less surprising than humanity’s lack of interest in finding out how to join the happily deceased.

Partly by disenchanting the graveyard, then, Blair’s melancholic-optimistic narrative renders the “gloomy path” of death less dark; “nor untrod, nor tedious: The Fatigue / Will soon go off” (690-91). Blair, in turn, echoes Thomas Parnell, who in “A Night-Piece on Death” (1721), speaks in the voice of death itself: “Fools! if you less provok’d your Fears, / No more my Spectre-Form appears. / Death’s but a Path that must be trod, / If Man wou’d ever pass to God” (65-68). The source of fear, for Parnell, is “visionary Crowds” of shades “slow, and wan, and wrap’d with Shrouds,” which seem to burst from their graves when the moon “fades” (47-50). Rather than a Gothic terror, however, this crowd becomes a chorus of theological advice: “Think, Mortal, what it is to dye” (52). Death is not personified as a fearful ghost, even though it speaks, but is remediated as narrative agent of wisdom. Those who contemplate it aright are promised release from earth’s “Prison” to “greet the glitt’ring Sun: / Such Joy, tho’ far transcending Sense, / Have pious Souls at parting hence” (79, 82-84).
These ghosts of graveyard poetry, from the earliest examples of the genre, are far removed from the specters of hyperbolic Gothic fiction. Either imagined or allegorical, they serve to illustrate the foolishness of superstition and the wisdom of contemplative melancholic optimism: “To frown at Pleasure, and to smile in Pain, / Fir’d at the Prospect of unclouded Bliss. / Heav’n in Reversion, like the Sun, as yet / Beneath th’ Horizon, chears us in this World” (Young, Night Thoughts VIII.1054-57). This is not Crusoe’s cheer at deliverance from death; it is cheer in death that begins immediately. “Reversion,” as Johnson defines it, is the “state of being to be possessed after the death of the present possessor.” Young’s Christians are on both sides of that equation, being the present possessors of heavenly joy in part, but “being to be possessed” fully after their own deaths.

Melancholia therefore could not abate the “smile in Pain,” and most importantly, communication with spirits was not necessary in attaining this optimism, even if they invisibly helped guide one’s feet. In the words of Cheyne, spirits may be “more certain” than anything “discoverable by the meer use of Human Faculties” but there is no “plain Necessity” to consider them (4)—or in Blair’s pun, “’tis no Matter.” Even the devil’s influence inside the imagination could be fought without recourse to demonology. Across literary genres, from didactic sermons to scientific discourse, prose meditations, and contemplative and allegorical poetry, melancholic optimism offered aid in the plot of life’s universal drama while deflecting evidence of invisible beings.

Samuel Richardson operated in the center of this circle of melancholic optimists, printing their graveyard verse, devouring the wisdom of their journalism, and putting their medical cures into practice. When he published his own novels, especially Clarissa,
the amending effects of proper night thoughts were clearly on display. So too was the occultation-without-effacement of the invisible realm, but Richardson did not quite fully eclipse the plot-changing agency of spirits. Though meditation had largely replaced Defoe’s equivocal spiritual converse in the imagination, vestiges of suggestive spiritual language remain. Dreams and apprehensions plague Clarissa and her tormentor Lovelace, but they conspicuously ignore them. The success of Lovelace’s crime is thus a result of human moral error, not the failure of spirits. Clarissa, however, is able to achieve transcending pleasure in her deepest melancholy through “the thought of death,” while the narrative shows most vividly what happens to the Tinsells-turned-Lovelaces of the world who not only mock apparitions, but also perversely reinterpret the pointed hints of their hauntings.
3. Richardson’s Muted Supernaturalism

Samuel Richardson was not as forthcoming on spiritual cosmology as Defoe, but like Addison and the graveyard poets, he retained a keen interest in how Christian theology may function in narrative fiction. At first glance, his version of the Christian cosmos might look the most detached. *Clarissa* especially seems to disprove a benevolently-disposed, middling spiritual realm: Clarissa nobly resists Lovelace’s advances, fulfilling all that divine mandate could ask, yet she is overcome when Lovelace deprives her of her senses. No agent of divine mercy, spiritual or physical, comes to her aid. Why, in a providentially-governed universe, would such an offense against justice be countenanced?

A common answer is that the role of religion in *Clarissa* is to cultivate indifference toward the happenings of this world, to teach the reader not to expect supernatural aid in this life.71 “God dies away in us, as I may say, all human satisfactions, in order to subdue his poor creatures to Himself,” as Clarissa tells Mrs. Lovick, Mrs. Smith, and Belford near the end of her life (1337). Against this traditional reading, some critics have argued for a mystical Richardson, whose occult resonance is partially hidden even from himself. Richardson puts into play a powerful gnostic symbology, writes Margaret Doody, and not only is it unclear whether “the reader is meant to ’get’” it,

---

71 “The notion that Richardson’s spiritual views flow from the stream of rational, Enlightenment Christianity promulgated by Locke […] is widely shared” (E. Derek Taylor 36). Cf. John Dussinger: “The ‘great doctrines of Christianity’ that Richardson intended to inculcate[…] evidently […] centred on the rationale of undeserved suffering in the worldly sense and the necessity of future rewards and punishment” (“Stealing” 453).
Richardson “could not even have been comprehensible to himself” had “he not incorporated the conventional concerns” of moral theology (51, 60). There is an array of Richardsons, and the “interpretive last word can never be assigned […] to prudential ‘Mr. Richardson’ the bourgeois rationalist, nor to either of the interacting dialectics that shape Richardson’s irrationalistic Christianity” (Hensley 143).

This mix captures the multiplicity and uncertainty of the text, but lost is the agency of the invisible realm. Spirits are closer to the surface than rationalist, providentialist, or symbolistic readings would suggest. Just as things are often not what they seem—letters are intercepted, false messages interjected, pretenses invented—so too are immaterial worlds obscured, partly by the demands of verisimilitude and partly by Richardson’s alignment with what I have been calling melancholic optimism. Like Addison and Young, Richardson thought moral living a more effective narrative witness to the afterlife than spirits, yet even that message was constrained. He felt he needed to “steal in” Christian doctrine as a kind of surrogate, understated sermon in order to accommodate the theological tastes of the time, as John Dussinger notes, so strictures on supernatural content would have been even tighter. Moreover, Richardson did not want to expose his moral vision to ridicule—in setting scenes of potential and realized sexual

---

72 Cf. E. Derek Taylor on the influence of the mystic, John Norris of Bemerton.
73 Cf. also Dussinger’s “Conscience and the Pattern of Christian Perfection in Clarissa”: Richardson “believed that his reading public as a whole had an antipathy to religion and he consequently wished to restrain his heroine’s devotional habits within the text itself” (240). Stewart argues that Richardson might have felt his work to be a more effective kind of sermon, for young people especially, due to a 1730s “perception of the clergy as inadequate advocates of the Anglican position, and of the Church itself as weak, corrupt or remote” (“Pamela” 39).
violence, he was also working against the literary backdrop of comic Rosicrucian spirits involved in the rape of a lock of hair.\textsuperscript{74}

One need not uncover latent mysticism to access Richardson’s invisible realms, however. Richardson’s genre of psychological realism, operating under the aegis of Christian theological commitments, produces characters whose potent, nocturnal-style contemplations float ambiguous intimations of an invisible realm in the very phenomenology of letter writing. Epistolarity generates immediacy by the illusion of “writing, to the moment”\textsuperscript{75}—words are supposed to come fresh from the characters’ hands, still steeped in recent impressions and emotions—and this immediacy marks what otherwise might have gone unnoticed, supernatural agency included. Whereas Robinson Crusoe had had the advantage of lifelong retrospection to speculate about the origin of the strange premonitions which led him out of danger, Pamela and Clarissa narrate close to the event, with fewer occasions for filtering and commentary.\textsuperscript{76} They cannot theorize spirits as Crusoe does, but they bear witness to a haunting in their unpremeditated registration of recent actions, using a demonological lexicon.

\textsuperscript{74} Alexander Pope, \textit{The Rape of the Lock} (1712, 1714). In comparing Pope’s jesting to Richardson’s seriousness, Thomas Keymer (“Reception”) and Will Pritchard, among others, have identified verbal echoes and thematic similarities, but the comparison has not extended to spirits.

\textsuperscript{75} The phrase appears in a letter Richardson wrote to Lady Bradshaigh (\textit{Selected} 289).

\textsuperscript{76} Joe Bray notes that “writing, to the moment” is a guise, because the letter writer is always composing after the fact. Thus, Bray cites several critics who he says are rightly “doubtful as to whether [Richardson’s] ‘to the moment’ style really can completely close the gap between ‘the event and its transcription,’ insisting on a delay, however tiny. The narrating self can never completely merge with the experiencing self” (59). This is true; there is space for some introspection on the part of Richardson’s characters, but not the years that Crusoe has after diegesis to work up his experiences into a didactic system.
In Gothic novels and Romantic poetry, this sensation of impressions will
demystify the supernatural and spectralize the material. Richardson’s narrative technique
previews the development, even as it reflects a more traditional spiritual cosmology. His
literary form represents a “realistic” subjectivity which is hospitable to invisible agency
as an effect and affect of crisis. Rather than a counter-current to enlightened modernity,
spectrality courses through the main line of psychological narrative across the eighteenth
century, well in advance of the terror-raising stories of Walpole, Radcliffe, and Monk
Lewis.

Language, Providence, and Misinterpreted Impulses

Philosophically and personally, Richardson was deeply embedded in the network
of Cheyne, Young, and Hervey. He printed the works of all three and was advised by
Cheyne on his health.77 While he worried that Hervey may be a touch too “inclined to the
enthusiastic part of Methodism” for comfort (Correspondence 13), he embraced the
advice of Cheyne and Young. Cheyne, in turn, consulted with him on Pamela, while
Young was one of his most respected interlocutors in the development of Clarissa. “What
contentions, what disputes have I involved myself in with my poor Clarissa, through my

77 John Dussinger’s warning about overemphasizing influence is well taken: “Richardson
seems to have been fairly neutral about the material that he printed and found no
difficulty at all in having both sides of a controversy, including the great deist debate of
the 1730s and 1740s, represented by his press” (“Stealing” 471). It is a warning Stewart
echoes: “few conclusions can be drawn about Richardson’s own beliefs from his eclectic
practices as a printer” (“Pamela” 38). Some connections are stronger than others,
however. As G.S. Rousseau notes, “Richardson relied monolithically on Cheyne for
professional medical advice, as well as for literary guidance in the composition of
Pamela” (83).
own diffidence, and for want of a will! I wish I had never consulted any body but Dr. Young, who so kindly vouchsafed me his ear, and sometimes his opinion” (Selected 84).

The melancholic and optimistic strands that emerge from this network have pulled variously in critical assessments. Ian Watt, noting Richardson’s role in printing Hervey and Young, argues that Richardson participates in funereal contemplation for both financial and theological reasons (217-18), while James Fortuna sees in Pamela’s optimism “literary evidence of an eighteenth-century belief that a divine power was perpetually at work, in and through man and nature, to protect and reward struggling virtue” (8). One need only know how to read God’s presence through the Puritan-style journal-keeping that Richardson’s heroines practice in their letter writing.78 Vivasvan Soni goes so far as to assert that Pamela’s “experiences endow happiness with the temporality of an affect rather than a judgment deferred to the end of a narrative” (19). This emphasis on happiness as a feeling or a reward that can be experienced on earth, in turn, casts doubt on the very reason for the novel’s trial narrative—to determine whether Pamela is virtuous. Perhaps she has been angling for personal advantage all along, the chief premise of satires like Shamela (20).79

78 While Richardson does demonstrate this structural similarity with Puritan spiritual autobiography (cf. Erickson 202), it is important not to overemphasize theological Puritanism in Richardson’s thought. James Fortuna writes, “the view that Richardson’s literary roots are Puritan or Calvinist is not supported by a careful reading of the canon, where none of the major characters in his novels appear to be anything but orthodox Anglican” (5). He perhaps overstates the case a bit—one need not substantiallysubscribe to a theological system in order to adopt its literary methods—but the general point stands.

79 Pamela is therefore sometimes pitched as an apprentice novel, a successful but immature first-run before Richardson developed psychological intricacy through multiple letter writers in Clarissa. Cf. Terry Eagleton: “It is, so to speak, a cartoon version of Clarissa” (37).
Taken in isolation, Richardson’s optimism and melancholy point to a spiritual realm populated only by distant providence. “Rather than invoking a populous world of spirits and miracles as Bunyan and Defoe do, Richardson presents a strangely quiet and opaque universe governed by a God who is trusted but never seen or heard” (Damrosch, God’s 241). In Clarissa, the absent God puts a strain on the heroine’s trust, while in Pamela, his distanced governing yields unprecedented happiness in the material world, and so militates against realism.80

The critical emphasis on romance underwritten by providence in Pamela and the tragedy of pathos unmitigated in Clarissa, however, conceals how optimism and melancholy work together to spectral ends. In one sense, their juncture shuts out spiritual communications. When Clarissa plans her funeral, she sounds like Young as desire for coming death, even a sense of pleasure, finds its way into her speech: “there is such a vast superiority of weight and importance in the thought of death, and its hoped-for happy consequences, that it in a manner annihilates all other considerations and concerns” (1306).81 Earthly life has faded before “the thought of death” (that Youngian phrase) and the happiness that it promises. Yet, in following this melancholic-optimistic pattern of negating second causes for greater contemplation of the first cause, Clarissa, like Addison and the graveyard poets, also affirms the possibility of middling spiritual agency.

80 “Those qualities which strengthen the portrait of Pamela as exemplum[…] all undercut the more ‘realistic’ element which makes the novel so promising” (Wolff 66).
81 Richardson in a letter to Aaron Hill acknowledges that his readers, like Clarissa’s bedside witnesses, might find Clarissa’s death-focus strange: “I am not to expect that the World will bestow Two Readings, or One indeed, attentive one, on such a grave Story as Clarissa, which is designed to make those think of Death who endeavour all they can to banish it from their Thoughts” (Selected 126).
Her witness comes in the subtle evidence of lived experience; it is hidden in written letters and not advanced as developed theory. Through allusion and unwitting expressions, Pamela and Clarissa both reveal the architecture of the spiritual realm that undergirds material reality—or at least their (sub-)cognition of it. The “unwitting” quality is Richardson’s art, preserving realism while slipping in the fantastic. Starting with *Pamela*, his characters channel the literary and literal specters of Shakespeare and Joseph Glanvill in a chain of associations which will ultimately produce a ghost at the deathbed of arch-villain Lovelace.

Richardson gives his characters a psychological resource in the unpremeditated diction of Biblical angelology and demonology. This language might be written off as mere idiom—Mrs. Jewkes’s declaration that an escaped Pamela “must be carry’d away, as St. Peter was out of Prison, by some Angel,” for example, is a profanation that illustrates her corrupt character (161). For Pamela, however, angelic language is more like a useful invocation in time of need. At moments of vulnerability, when Pamela is in danger of losing control of her body (leaving her open to external agency of all kinds), she readily calls on divine aid. Is she merely being pious, or are spirits more efficacious than she realizes?

In a critical moment early in the novel, Pamela tries to ward off Mr. B with a reference to that greatest of ghost stories, *Hamlet*: “I said, like as I had read in a Book a Night or two before, Angels, and Saints, and all the Host of Heaven, defend me!” (29). *Hamlet* had steeled himself against the “questionable shape” of his father’s spirit, unable to tell whether it was “spirit of health, or goblin damn’d” that demanded attention to a revenge plan (Shakespeare 1.4.43, 40). The goblin accosting Pamela asserts his own
questionable proposal, but if Pamela’s interlocutor is more corporeal than Hamlet’s, her method of escape seems strangely spectral. Mr. B puts his hand in her bosom, and “Indignation” gives her an alien “double Strength” to break away before she faints in her room (29). Pamela just manages to slam the door, and “the Key being on the Inside, it locked.” This subjectless action is never explained further. Who locked it? It is unlikely that Pamela herself could have taken the time considering that Mr. B. was on her heels, “so close, he got hold of my Gown,” and she fainted almost immediately upon entering. Yet, when Richardson tweaked the language of the passage in later editions, he left the door-locking description in a reflexive construction, “it locked.”

It is possible that the door had a spring lock installed, which would engage the bolt automatically upon closure. But since this mechanism would put someone at risk of trapping herself outside (or indeed, inside) of a room, spring locks were sometimes equipped with a separate catch which would prevent automatic locking. Did Pamela slam the door so hard that she dislodged the catch? If so, was this a result of freak chance? The uncertainties compound. Pamela afterwards implicates no spirits in her escape, but the close proximity of her invocation of angels to her strange deliverance is suggestive. She does her utmost, and unseen forces (angelic, providential, or aleatory) come to her aid.

Mr. B only adds to the ambiguity: while Pamela asserts loss of control, he insists she is a hypocrite who demonstrates “all the Arts of her Sex” in the staging of a hysterical fit (33). If anything, Mr. B says, “I was bewitch’d, I think, by her” (32). While Mr. B’s language of bewitching is satiric, Pamela does find the devil startlingly close. After she contemplates the delicious sympathy a suicide would elicit, she immediately recants the reverie as a thought born of Satan’s propagation. At first, it is merely mysterious: “God
forgive me! but a sad Thought came just then into my Head!” (158). Pamela does not claim ownership; the thought simply appeared. Soon thereafter, however, she makes direct attributions: “And then thought I, (and Oh! that Thought was surely of the Devil’s Instigation; for it was very soothing and powerful with me) these wicked Wretches, who now have no Remorse, no Pity on me, will then be mov’d to lament their Misdoings” (159). Perhaps she protests too much, melodramatically excoriating her tormentors while conveniently blaming her unwonted fury on the devil (an understandable natural reaction). But if Pamela sees the devil in Mr. B’s actions, why should the devil not try to assert control of her if an opportunity presented? The demonological language again suggests presence: “Indeed, my Apprehensions of the Usage I should meet with, had like to have made me miserable for ever!” (158, my emphasis). The sequence even evokes the devil’s bath as component of Pamela’s melancholy since she recognizes that the thought plays upon her predilections; it “was very soothing, and powerful with me.” Whether natural or spectral pedigree is most dominant, both are in the DNA as the mind in crisis turns reflexively to the supernatural.

*Clarissa* is much darker. Here, bodily incapacity fails as a shield to virtue; if there are middling spirits promoting the heroine’s interests, they seem rather ineffectual. Clarissa herself tends to ignore the usual indications of spiritual communication—Defoe’s language of hints, apprehensions, premonitions, etc—or treats them as earthly rather than spiritual phenomena. In an explanation of her abduction by Lovelace, she weighs her concern about a secret meeting with Lovelace against the evil of a forced marriage to the odious Solmes on the following Wednesday:
As the above kind of reasoning had lessened my apprehensions as to the
Wednesday, it added to those I had of meeting Mr. Lovelace—now, as it
seemed, not only the nearest, but the heaviest evil; principally indeed
because nearest; for little did I dream (foolish creature that I was, and
every way beset!) of the event proving what it has proved. (373)

It was “reasoning” rather than spirits that caused “apprehensions” about Lovelace,
Clarissa reflects, and so she neglected to act on them. She could not “dream” that events
would transpire as they did (though, as we shall see, a disconcerting dream only days
earlier might have warned her). If even the moral paragon Clarissa can have her
reasoning overwhelmed, the reader might infer that no amount of right thinking will
shield a person from evil plots. The material world is irredeemably treacherous, neither
virtue nor orthodoxy is proof against evil actions, so one should set her eyes upon heaven
alone. Secondary causes—terrestrial or spiritual—become unimportant.

Clarissa herself vacillates about attributing her capture with its train of ill
consequences to her own inexperience. She laments that “having no reason to apprehend
danger from headstrong and disgraceful impulses, I too little, perhaps, cast up my eyes to
the Supreme Director[. . .] Inexperience and presumption, with the help of a brother and
sister who have low ends to answer in my disgrace, have been my ruin!” (565). Clarissa
again invokes a Defoevian spiritual vocabulary with “impulses,” but they are once more
an earthly affair, “headstrong and disgraceful,” and it is not even clear whether they are
her own or Lovelace’s.
If reasoning informed by virtue cannot forestall evil consequences, *theodicy* becomes an issue for the novel.\(^{82}\) The idea that “One devious step at setting out!—That must be it: which pursued, has led me so far out of my path that I am in a wilderness of doubt and error; and never, never shall find my way out of it” might seem a little unfair of God, and Clarissa can barely restrain herself from suggesting so (565-66). Her little tag, “—that must be it,” looks like a feeble attempt to convince herself of her own guilt, and in her next letter, Clarissa offers Anna a bit of poetry from Dryden’s *Oedipus* that further questions divine governance:

It were an impiety to adopt the following lines, because it would be throwing upon the decrees of Providence a fault too much my own. But often do I revolve them, for the sake of the general similitude which they bear to my unhappy yet undesigned error.

To you, great gods! I make my last appeal:

Or clear my virtue, or my crimes reveal.

If wand’ring in the maze of life I run,

And backward tread the steps I sought to shun,

Impute my error to your own decree;

My FEET are guilty; but my HEART is free.

(568)

---

\(^{82}\) Cf. Keymer: “Though more reticent in its politics than *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa* is much more explicit, and more problematic, in its theodicy. [...] Richardson’s *deus absconditus* is very unlike Fielding’s benign intelligence, and the difference points in *Clarissa* to troubling conclusions – that the Fall demands in atonement perpetual struggle in a hostile world, and is only expiated by death” (*Richardson’s* 209).
Clarissa hedges her “impiety,” disclaiming total adoption of Dryden’s lines, even as she recites them from memory. They are a “similitude” to her situation, which is another kind of hedging. “Devious step,” “a wilderness of doubt and error,” “my unhappy, yet undesigned error” – Clarissa’s constellation of moral language indicates hapless wandering, deviousness, and error as mistaken path rather than illicit errantry. “I am, in my own opinion, a poor lost creature: and yet cannot charge myself with one criminal or faulty inclination” (565).

Clarissa’s theological wandering leads her away from another spiritual insight: the possibility that impulses are not just headstrong urges, but something more mysterious that could point the proper way. The “devious step” at “starting out” was Crusoe’s original sin too (and indeed, somewhat worse, for he was not free from “faulty inclination”), but Crusoe reversed course when he attended to the hints that led him away from danger. Clarissa cannot in the end navigate around disaster. She comes to peace with her errant beginning only by mixing resignation with repentance. Echoing the “devious step,” Clarissa tells Lovelace, “[t]housands of my sex are more nice than I; for they would have avoided the devious path I have been surprised into” (595). Where Crusoe was frequently “surprised into” safety by mysterious agency in his “Strange Surprizing Adventures,” Clarissa experiences surprise in its older signification as military ambush, something beyond her control and hence partially exculpatory (though lack of preparation is implied in the metaphor and in Clarissa’s pious protestations that “thousands” are more nice).

---

83 Lovelace himself will later recognize the same danger: “When we enter upon a devious course, we think we shall have it in our power, when we will, to return to the right path. But it is not so, I plainly see” (915).
Plot itself depends on this “deviancy,” implicating the author as well.  

But by shifting blame back to the individual while moving reward to the afterlife, Richardson mitigates the challenge that Clarissa’s misstep poses to providence—both his own and God’s—while obscuring the spiritual help that might have saved her. Edward Young advanced this narratological and theological view of deviancy: “Is it contrary to the common method of Providence to permit the best to suffer most? No. When the best so suffer, does it not most deeply affect the human heart? Yes. And is it not your business to affect the human heart as deeply as you can? Yes” (Correspondence 180). Why do readers so criticize Richardson, then, asks Young? Perhaps “from such a degree of infidelity as suffers not their thoughts to accompany Clarissa any farther than her grave. Did they look farther, the pain they complain of would be removed; they would find her to be an object of envy as well as pity.” Failing to read the supernatural reward of heaven is to stop the story at Job’s sufferings.

Young’s melancholic optimism affirms Clarissa’s ultimate happiness and justifies God, author, and narrative. In this moral figuration, the first cause is the center of the story and needs to be highlighted, lest audiences overlook it. Yet, in moving (spiritual) second causes to the background, Richardson does not obliterate them; he renders them unreliable. In the bleak vale of Richardson’s earthly world, the invisible realm registers equivocally, as unheeded supernatural force and epiphenomenon of Clarissa’s and even Lovelace’s psychic struggles. No editorial voice stabilizes the array of possible meanings. Instead, the multiple voices of letter-writing insinuate a subconscious lexicon of

---

84 Put in a more psychoanalytic frame: “Without the repressions of Clarissa and the neuroses of Lovelace there would be no novel at all” (Eagleton 93).
impressions and apprehensions without attributing source. Even as the overt rhetoric of the novel suggests that trust should be placed elsewhere, the invisible realm continues to hover in the language as a ghostly, largely untapped resource.

**Resisting Spiritual Hints**

The “devious” course passages, which at first seem to uphold inexorable fate at the expense of supernatural intervention, preserve a surprisingly close association with invisible influence. When Clarissa attempts to figure out how an escape with Lovelace might be virtuously achieved, she interrupts her brainstorming with the interjection, “[b]ut these strange forebodings!—Yet I can, if you advise, cause the chariot he shall bring with him, to carry me directly for town, […]” (342). A hint of subconscious hesitation flashes into her conscious act of writing, the exclamation-dash an apt symbol for her mental process: “strange forebodings!—” The dash is an uninterpreted, suggestive blank, resisted immediately by the coordinating conjunction as Clarissa continues to plan.

Such resisted forebodings keep returning. In her next letter, Clarissa is a little more circumspect. Having overslept, she awakes “in great terror from a dream which has made such an impression upon me, that, slightly as I think of dreams, I cannot help taking this opportunity to relate it to you” (342). In its barest outline, Lovelace, discovering a plot against his life by the Harlowes, contrives to murder Clarissa and toss her in a grave “among two or three half-dissolved carcases” (342-43). The macabre vision weighs heavily and Clarissa tries to sort it out: it “was owing to my disturbed imagination; huddling together wildly all the frightful ideas which my aunt’s communications and discourse, my letter to Mr. Lovelace, my own uneasiness upon it, and the apprehensions
of the dreaded Wednesday, furnished me with” (343). Since the idea of imagination as medium of spiritual communication does not occur to her, she does not act upon the dream’s apprehensive promptings, even though its consequences flow from the very course of action upon which she is soon to embark.

Her dream may not come true literally, but its general lineaments prove true enough—submitting to Lovelace’s control will eventually lead to Clarissa’s death.85 Before she is seized upon by the military “surprise” of Lovelace’s abduction, Clarissa is repeatedly seized by these internal apprehensions. Yet, she fails to connect her forebodings or her dream to the impending interview with Lovelace, even going so far as to ironically exclaim “little did I dream” of the consequences. The spectral perspective sheds new light on her worry that she was “too much indeed relying upon her own strength” of virtuous intent to carry her through the interview (381)—perhaps she had been invisibly warned all along.

If so, Clarissa does not recognize the assistance. She is disposed to disparage the supernatural when she mentions it at all. When, a few letters earlier, Clarissa describes a “pathless and lonesome” part of Harlowe-Place where she believes Lovelace is hiding, the editor footnotes a passage from “another of her letters” in which Clarissa says the place

used to be thought of by us when children, and by the maidservants, with a degree of terror; as the habitation of owls, ravens and other ominous birds; and as haunted by ghosts, goblins, spectres. The genuine result of the

85 For Crusoe too, dreams were not literally true but frequently communicated enough of the general truth to offer actionable value.
country loneliness and ignorance; notions which, early propagated, are apt to leave impressions even upon minds grown strong enough, at the same time, to despise the like credulous follies in others. (352)

It is a very succinct dismissal of superstition, grouping together the usual suspects of credulity—children, country folk, the servant class—as well as the standard Lockean explanation for continuance of fantastical belief: namely, powerful impressions upon young or ignorant minds.

As we have seen in previous chapters, however, rejection of “ghosts, goblins, spectres” can coexist with an acceptance of active middling spirits. And if Clarissa consistently ignores or denigrates the possibility of supernatural communication, it is apparent that the spiritual potential of dreams and premonitions was known to Richardson. When Lovelace later narrates a strange dream of his own, he directly refers to seventeenth-century demonology:

I shall always have a prodigious regard to dreams henceforward. I know not but I may write a book upon that subject; for my own experience will furnish out a great part of it. Glanville of Witches, and Baxter’s History of Spirits and Apparitions, and the Royal Insignificant’s Demonology, will be nothing at all to Lovelace’s Reveries. (924)

Lovelace’s tone here is mocking—his dream does not provide a glimpse of future events, but instead suggests stratagems that he might inflict upon Clarissa, so that his only praise is praise of self invention.86 But the mention of Glanvill, Baxter, and James I does bring

---

86 R.D. Stock also notes the mockery implied in the fact that “[n]aturally, Lovelace gets the titles wrong, and reverie, connoting as it does the delightful daydream, is scarcely commensurate with his portentous vision” (274). Florian Stuber asserts that Lovelace’s
their supernatural systems into intertextual dialogue with *Clarissa*; Lovelace’s airy derision of apparition theory might even serve to recommend it to readers.

Lovelace, after all, is at his worst. Having just raped Clarissa, his sympathy for her delirium evaporates in a moment as he dreams up a plan to fool Clarissa into lying with him again. The reader is likely to see more than a little truth in Lovelace’s bantering commentary to Belford, “[w]ho says that, sleeping and waking, I have not fine helps from some *body*, some *spirit* rather, as thou’lt be apt to say?—But no wonder that a Beelzebub has his devilkins to attend his call” (923). When Clarissa detects his stratagem, however, he is quick to execrate his earlier lightheartedness. “I who but a few hours ago had such faith in dreams, and had proposed out of hand to begin my treatise of *Dreams sleeping and Dreams waking*, […] shall never more depend upon those flying follies, those illusions of a fancy depraved, and run mad” (925). Disappointed at the failed “prophecy,” Lovelace no longer playfully identifies imagination as medium of supernatural messages, but as source of illusion and insanity. The slipperiness between these two poles haunts the whole novel—are spirits real? a childish fancy? a natural, traumatic psychology?—with Lovelace’s deathbed the most dramatic enactment of the ambiguity, as we shall see.

Richardson in the space of a few pages reproduces the range of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century interpretations of imagination, and by ridiculing its spiritual dimensions in the voice of the novel’s villain, lends the supernatural an ambivalent credence. Lovelace throughout the narrative remains a locus for this ambivalence. After plotting “dream was never actually dreamt” because he had told Belford that a plot was underway before the night of the supposed dream, and thus, Lovelace was only “showing off his writing talents, his wit, and his powers of invention” (115). Of course, even if Lovelace had been planning this stratagem beforehand, he still could have dreamt about it.
Clarissa’s rape, Anna Howe is only half metaphoric when she says she cannot account for Lovelace’s interception and forgery of her recent letters:

I never had any faith in the Stories that go current among country girls, of spectres, familiars, and demons; yet I see not any other way to account for this wretch’s successful villainy, and for his means of working up his specious delusions, but by supposing (if he be not the devil himself), that he has a familiar constantly at his elbow. (1014)

With a proviso against superstition that mirrors Clarissa’s own dismissal of “ghosts, goblins, spectres,” Anna appears to entertain the idea of real infernal influence in Lovelace’s plotting: “I have hardly any doubt that he has sold himself for a time” (1015). In a lighter context, “hardly any doubt” would signal Anna’s facetious humor, but the situation here is grave. She is “[a]pprehensive for both our safeties” and begins the letter with imprecatory prayer (1014). Lovelace’s devilry of forgery is a powerful form of literary possession, rendering the source of familiar letter impressions on the page as doubtful as the source of mental impressions. Crafting plausible fictional doubles from the novel’s own medium of realistic epistolarity, Lovelace makes Anna a particularly uncanny phantom: his “hand, indeed, is astonishingly like mine; and the cover, I see, is actually my cover.”

Lovelace chuckles over metaphors of infernal assistance but struggles to identify the source of noble impulses which militate against his rakish behavior. Soon after the

87 Anna Howe might use “mere cliché” in her characterization of Lovelace as demonic, but in this passage, Stock says, “her tone becomes more serious[…. A]s Miss Howe’s comments on Lovelace’s diabolism move from cliché to gravity, his own truly diabolic qualities gradually emerge” (272).

105
abduction, he is charmed by Clarissa’s “innocent confusion” and fervently proposes marriage, an action that surprises both (492). He writes to Belford, “[w]as the devil in me!—I no more intended all this ecstatic nonsense than I thought the same moment of flying in the air!” (493). Lovelace then brings this fantastical image of possession down to a disconcertingly realistic version: “Didst thou ever before hear of a man uttering solemn things by an involuntary impulse, in defiance of premeditation and of all his proud schemes?” Pride, as much a personality trait as a sinful propensity, is Lovelace’s defining characteristic. He calls it “my sovereign pride” in this same letter and would not willingly humble it. An alternate narrative force—spirits? sentiment? conscience? madness?—butts up against his usual plotting.

Later, reflecting on these swings between soft feeling and cold calculation, Lovelace asks: “How then comes it, that all these compassionate, and, as some would call them, honest sensibilities go off?—Why, Miss Howe will tell thee: she says, I am the devil—By my conscience, I think he has at present a great share in me” (657). His mild oath “by my conscience” is appropriate and ironic all at once, because he next identifies conscience as a foreign presence as well as the source of all his good intentions.

“How have I been run away with!—By what?—Canst thou say by what?—Oh thou lurking varletess CONSCIENCE!—Is it thou that has thus made me of party against myself?—How camest thou in?—In what disguise, thou egregious haunter of my more agreeable hours?[…]” (658)

Lovelace obscures the agency behind his impulses, tracing them to the devil or the conscience, which he treats as a foreign, even “haunting” invader. Modern psychological
theory would offer suggestions enough for why thoughts so directly contrary to a person’s predilections might force themselves into consciousness, but if Lovelace evinces a recognizably modern psychology, its ambiguous linguistic foundation is apparitional. Into the self-division between “me” and “myself,” Lovelace introjects conscience as “thou,” the antiquated second-person pronoun he had adopted for correspondence with his favorite, John Belford: “it was an agreed rule with them to take in good part whatever freedoms they treated each other with, if the passages were written in that style” (142). Object of friendly address and invader of the heart, the “egregious haunter” takes on a doubly personal cast.

There is a striking parallel between this spectral notion of Lovelace’s uneasy experience with strange bodily phenomena and Raymond Stephanson’s analysis of Lovelace’s nervous sensibility: “Despite the psychological implication of nervous physiology in women—i.e., that having weaker nerves and being more sensible they are therefore more imaginative and more easily moved—it is Lovelace who is the most imaginative character in the novel” (280). The same could be said with “imagination” as medium of spiritual communication. In terms of the seventeenth century, we might say mysterious impulses war against Lovelace’s treasured deadly sin, giving him a chance to counteract the balneum diaboli, the devil’s surest physio-material means of manipulating him (making it all the more ironic that he identifies the positive impulse to marry as “the devil in me”).88 After Clarissa defers Lovelace’s proposals, however, Lovelace, with pride wounded, resumes his plotting. Thus, early in the novel he rejects impulses which,

88 In terms of the emerging cult of sensibility, we might say he rejects becoming a man of feeling.
if accepted with perseverance, might have led to a happy ending, and later in the novel tries (unsuccessfully) to follow a dream that promises a second rape of Clarissa. As he foils and is foiled by these involuntary impressions, however, Clarissa becomes increasingly “impulsive,” trusting her intimations to defeat Lovelace’s plot after the rape.

**Graveyard and Ghost**

Clarissa quietly becomes attuned to the impressions she had rejected early on. Lovelace’s plan for a second rape is to fool Clarissa into thinking that Dorcas, his servant, has defected to Clarissa and secured a getaway coach. In reality, Clarissa would be conveyed to Lovelace’s confederates. It is a tempting prospect of freedom, but Clarissa hesitates when it comes to the point. The editor, piecing together memoranda that Clarissa took on the occasion, writes, “having apprehensions that Dorcas might be a traitress, [Clarissa] would have got away while she was gone out to see for a coach,” but Mrs. Sinclair blocks the doorway (926). Though she cannot escape the house yet, Clarissa does escape another attempt on her body by defeating Lovelace’s plot. The entire scene is a direct inversion of her decision-making process at Harlowe-Place when she ignored forebodings in anticipation of a similar supposed freedom.

“Apprehension” could certainly be attributable to paranoia, though other memoranda taken after the rape demonstrate that Clarissa has submitted her reasoning powers to spiritual guidance. Fearful of her “father’s curse” and relinquishing any “hope for miracles in my favour,” Clarissa nevertheless throws herself upon God’s mercy:
“Lord protect me!” (927). She trusts faith instead of reason. 89 Ann Van Sant describes this transformation in terms of experimental testing, by which the novelist mirrors scientific and even alchemical tests of the material world, with the rape as “final stage” (77). Lovelace’s trials “heroize” Clarissa, as “Richardson’s means of articulating his own novelistic intention – to demonstrate through her suffering that Clarissa is gold” (66). The test succeeds: Clarissa emerges from the fires of the rape not reduced to base material, but purified into moral gold. It not only shows Clarissa’s quality; it also imparts to her this newfound interpretive ability. Clarissa learns to heed apprehensions and put faith in God, and she also learns to challenge Lovelace’s plotting directly. Shortly after the rape, she cuts right through his use of a forged letter, supposedly from her uncle, about reconciliation: “O Lovelace, thou art surely nearly allied to the grand deceiver in thy endeavour to suit temptations to inclinations!” (928).

Yet, even as Clarissa demonstrates deeper insight, she still does not venture any commentary on the source of helpful impulses. One would expect at least a brief gloss on the agents that God sends to her aid now that she knows how to listen, but none is forthcoming. Without explicit mention of such beings, one might infer that this novel world is void of middling spiritual agents after all. The reader might even be tempted into a purely proto-Blakean reading of the text, whereby Clarissa’s apprehensions and her willingness to follow them flow not from supernatural power, but from herself, from the power of a new kind of innocence that can be acquired only by way of experience—

89 Cf. Stewart: “In her eventually complete disregard for self, after she has been purged of any pride she might have had, Clarissa looks back to the old idea of salvation by faith alone” (Eighteenth-Century 66).
giving the image of a glorious and transcendent Clarissa (and so, true to her name “the most clear”) rather than a humble and spiritually-attuned Clarissa.

It is a compelling possibility, one which Margaret Doody raises in her reading of a “Gnostic Clarissa,” and there is a sense in which Clarissa is beatified by the text. But there is a simpler explanation for Clarissa’s omission of spirits: she has no opportunity to consider them. In this respect, her project is different from Robinson Crusoe’s. With the benefit of retrospection, Crusoe could introduce a theory of apparitions alongside hints and apprehensions experienced in the moment. His hope was that readers might benefit from his example of meditating upon inexplicable impressions. Clarissa, conversely, has no voice after the conclusion of diegetic events. In Richardson’s narrative frame, there can be no didactic relationship between a wiser, older narrator and a reader who might benefit from her reflections.

Clarissa does realize that her story could “be a warning to all” (1319), and hence appoints Belford as a literary executor of her correspondence, but as Marta Kvande writes, “there is little sense (and no specific evidence) that Clarissa herself controls her printed representation” (246). Lacking Crusoe’s pretense of a larger narrative design, Clarissa is more concerned to claim her own inheritance in heaven than to attempt

---

90 Clarissa glorified is a fairly common assessment of the novel’s conclusion. Richardson himself says “Clarissa has the greatest of Triumphs even in this World,” but her Christian triumph is hardly incompatible with her spiritual humility (Selected Letters 108).
91 Although Clarissa does exert a kind of posthumous influence. Ann Louise Kibbie shows how Clarissa’s bequeathal of her grandfather’s estate backwards to her father is one method of “Clarissa’s speaking, in perpetuity, from the grave” (124). Richard Hannaford points to the letters Clarissa drafts for reading after her death as a kind of ultimate last move in a game with her family: “[f]rom her dead hand, the family has no escape—no countermaneuver is possible” (92). When I say Clarissa has no voice after death, I mean she has no organizing, extra-diegetic narrator’s or editor’s voice.
theorizing apparitions. And even this moral-theological motivation pales before the strength of sentiment: Clarissa’s story is a long, compelling drama of psychological struggle, too intense (as its invested readers attest) to serve as 1500-page illustrative sermon and treatise. Richardson writes a modern Aristotelian tragedy (as Clarissa’s murmuring of Oedipus implies) that cannot be slotted into a simple moral parable.92

Subtle spectral messages are therefore hinted at through perceptions recorded “to the moment” rather than through example strengthened by precept. In the thick of this “to the moment” action, Clarissa does not have leisure or motive to meditate upon potential spiritual second causes. She is at first too concerned with escaping from Lovelace’s clutches. Then when she does escape, she is too absorbed in preparation for death to attend to any second causes, spiritual or physical.93 Lovelace, far in advance of the rape, is prophetic when he writes, “[s]o, Belford, for all her future joys she depends entirely upon the Invisible Good. She is certainly right; since those who fix least upon second causes are the least likely to be disappointed — And is not this gravity for her gravity” (682).94 Clarissa’s focus on the first cause, in turn, translates into an obsession with funereal imagery: she orders a coffin brought into her bedroom and has it adorned with

92 Cf. Janet Todd: “Despite his insistence on instruction and Christian expression in fiction, Richardson, like his readers, well knew the power of the novel to escape from stated aims and pious intentions” (75).
93 Cf. her last letter to Lovelace: “I am so taken up with my preparation for this joyful and long-wished-for journey [i.e. to God’s house in Heaven], that I cannot spare one moment for any other business, having several matters of the last importance to settle first” (1233). Mary Poovey says that when Clarissa writes “to Anna Howe and Mrs. Norton from her deathbed, the details which fill her letters are not primarily of external reality but of the minute development of her spiritual progress. She is increasingly detached from and impervious to the particulars of her environment” (303).
94 The passage even hints at a Cheynian resonance, from Lovelace’s pairing of “joy” with a capitalized “Invisible Good,” to the Newtonian pun on “gravity” and the necessity not to “fix” on second causes.
memento-mori. Her visitors are horrified and judge it the most melancholy sight imaginable, but Clarissa finds it a source of happiness because it abstracts her from earthly life. If she cannot haul her weakened body into Young or Hervey’s graveyard for an object lesson on melancholic optimism, she can at least bring the graveyard to herself.

Lovelace, however, remains a schemer who loves to dwell on the machinations of material second causes. It is fitting, then, that he will continue to wrestle with potential spiritual second causes as well, even as Clarissa moves closer to the first cause. Most notably, Lovelace records one last dream with prophetic import near the end of the novel. Clarissa is in her final decline and Lovelace dreams that Clarissa intervenes in a duel between himself and Morden. When Lovelace moves to embrace his intercessor, however, the skies open and “glittering seraphs” translate Clarissa up to heaven, leaving him to grasp only her robe. Then, Lovelace says, he “dropped into a hole more frightful than that of Elden and tumbling over and over down it, without view of a bottom, I awaked in a panic” (1218). Disconcerting, to be sure, and in light of Lovelace’s eventual demise, perhaps the most accurate dream prophecy yet. But Lovelace does not take the dream in its plainest sense as a warning.

The very next day, misinterpreting a short letter from Clarissa about setting out for her father’s house (by which she means heaven), Lovelace makes merry with the supernatural once again. He thinks Clarissa means she is improving, and writes, “I shall now be convinced that there is something in dreams,” because the “bright form, lifting her up through [the ceiling] to another ceiling stuck round with golden Cherubims and Seraphims” really just “indicates the charming little boys and girls that will be the fruits of this happy reconciliation” (1234). Resolved to torture all things spiritual and
portentous into jocular, physical meaning, Lovelace even has an answer for his tumble into the Elden-like hole. What means it?

Ho! only this; it alludes to my disrelish to matrimony: which is a bottomless pit, a gulf, and I know not what. And I suppose, had I not awoke (in such a plaguy fright) I had been soused into some river at the bottom of the hole, and then been carried (mundified or purified from my past iniquities) by the same bright form (waiting for me upon the mossy banks) to my beloved girl; and we should have gone on, cherubiming of it, and carolling, to the end of the chapter.

Lovelace is not only being ludicrous here, he is willfully misinterpreting the signs of his own body from the previous night, when he “awaked in a panic; and was as effectually disordered for half an hour, as if my dream had been a reality” (1218). All sense of the reality of the panic is brushed aside as a “plaguy fright.” This is hermeneutic gymnastics with deadly consequences. God’s kingdom has come close, as it were, but Lovelace interprets it away.

Lovelace, therefore, is like Clarissa before her abduction—desirous to put his own construction on apprehensive feelings despite their monitory import. Whereas Clarissa finally follows hints to safety, Lovelace cannot rein in his self-favoring interpretations of strange experiences. Ever the author, he continues “cherubiming of it and caroling to the end of the chapter,” which concludes with Lovelace reiterating his enjoyment “of intrigue, and of plots that my soul loves to form and pursue” (1235). In the end, these plots kill him. Morden, Clarissa’s kinsmen and avenger, challenges him to a duel, and Lovelace loses. His dream, while not strictly true in the details of events, had provided
the general outline: Clarissa’s entrance into heaven, a duel with Morden, and finally, Lovelace’s tumble into the abyss of death.

The gross misinterpreter of potential spiritual communications is not only silenced abruptly, he also experiences one last potentially spiritual vision; in fact, the most conspicuous supernatural occurrence in the entire novel. Lovelace, in a state of semi-delirium from the injury, appears to see an invisible being and attracts the attention of witnesses by addressing it. His French valet, De la Tour, reports that a “delirious, at times,” Lovelace “several times cried out, Take her away! Take her away! but named nobody. […] And once he said, Look down, blessed Spirit, look down!—And there stopped—his lips however moving” (1487). For the third edition, Richardson emended the start of this passage to read, he “several times cried out, as if he had seen some frightful Spectre, Take her away![…]” (3rd ed. 249, my emphasis). It is the more telling send-off. Is the ghost De la Tour’s conjecture – or his judgment of similitude? Richardson pairs a potentially supernatural occurrence with a state of mental instability, and he mediates it through the servant class so susceptible to superstition, letting the ghost linger “as if,” in permanent subjunctivity. This is the psychology of haunting throughout the novel, an effect that will enthrall the Gothic novelists and Romantic poets.

In a 1748 letter to the dramatist Edward Moore, Richardson talks of “introduc[ing] a Ghost to terrify the departing Lovelace, tho’ I had not intended any body but Lovelace shou’d see it” and goes on to defend the ghost’s very equivocality: “I leave

95 Here again, Stephanson’s analysis of nerve theory is apropos: “If one wishes (as does Richardson) to authenticate the reality of nervous sensibility and its implications, what better way than by inflicting a nervous breakdown on the skeptical Lovelace?” (282). One might also say, if Richardson wants to authenticate the reality of a spiritual realm, what better way than by inflicting a terrifying spirit upon the skeptical Lovelace?
it to the Reader to suppose it the ghost of Miss Betterton, of his French Countess, or of whom he pleases, or to attribute it to his delirium for the sake of ….. & probability” (Selected 121). Trying to have it both ways with the ghost, there and not there, seen only by one man, Richardson tenders delirium as a potential source to assuage “probability,” the passport to respectability for the novel.

It is an apt coincidence that this letter is, as Carroll says, “the most nearly illegible of all Richardson’s letters,” and that the one indecipherable lacuna (represented by double ellipses) should come exactly at the moment when Richardson is explaining his use of apparitional ambiguity (qtd. in Richardson, Selected 118n11). While we do not know the second reason the reader might choose to interpret the ghost as effect of delirium, the fragmentary passage does sufficiently demonstrate that Richardson abdicates interpretive authority. Even the hint of a real ghost is a bold decision, however, in light of Richardson’s concern to reach an audience who lay little stock by the truth of religion. It is tempting to argue that Richardson himself would have inclined to the ghostly interpretation (even if the explanation of a delirious vision is better suited to “probability”), but what matters most is that he keeps open the possibility of supernatural intervention.

It might be objected that spirits affect very few decisions in Clarissa, and this critique is true enough. But Clarissa is not Robinson Crusoe. Very little happens by way of adventure—one recalls Johnson’s quip that “if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself” (Boswell,
—and the argument here is that the little action which does beset Clarissa may have been avoided had she attended to apprehensions (though, with the alternative being an eminent marriage to Solmes, the notion of choice is suspect). The same non-attendance to hints also explains Lovelace’s failure to reform. Since, however, this argument is predicated primarily upon a negative—potential hints which are not acted on—it is understandable that critics choose to focus on other spiritual aspects.

Nor, by extension, is it surprising that modern-day readers who take note of strange phenomena like Clarissa and Lovelace’s dreams interpret them primarily in terms of psychology—as introspection rather than communication. Florian Stuber invokes Freud to account for the images in Clarissa’s dream, because they “do not clearly prophesy any actual event. The images do reveal feelings Clarissa has about Lovelace” (111). Zigarovich proposes that the sepulchral imagery in Clarissa and Lovelace’s dreams is evidence of a shared if submerged view of sex and death as necrophilic fascination. The famous hermeneutic open-endedness of Clarissa allows for such interpretations, and Zigarovich provides a convincing reading of the sexual-psychological implications of Richardson’s choice of imagery and language. But the rhetoric and allusions in these

96 Johnson was not satirizing the trial of Clarissa’s virtue by giving a death sentence to the reader, but elevating it from the prolixity of the prose: “you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment” (Boswell, Boswell’s 2: 175).
97 Passim, but especially 115-119. Stuber and Zigarovich are not treading new ground, either. Allen Wendt in 1960 remarked that on “a subconscious level, [her] dream, with its phallic dagger, probably represents Clarissa’s fear of physical sex” (489).
98 For more on the open-endedness of Clarissa, see Stewart: “Clarissa, famously, is a work that offers the reader no definitive answers and no authoritative narrative voice” (Eighteenth-Century 53). Donald Wehrs, writing two-and-a-half decades earlier, had already found the critical narrative of hermeneutic open-endedness well-established and in need of nuance: meaning is not entirely arbitrary because “the story constitutes a world
scenes, combined with the dreams’ quasi-prophetic power (and they are predictive, like Crusoe’s dreams, even if they are not crystal clear), suggest equally that Clarissa and Lovelace were both being contacted by supernatural forces. The characters’ repeated association of death with sex in visions and apprehensions betoken not only the psychological return of a repressed desire, but also the possibility of otherworldly warning.

The Decline of the Supernatural?

Clarissa dramatizes an epistemological problem for the novelist who wishes to inculcate a Christian worldview while following probabilistic logic in the advancement of plot. Without an emblematic way of distributing rewards and punishments, how can one really be certain that providence guides the universe? Should a reader take the author’s word for it without proof? Richardson’s attempt to hold together a traditional Christian cosmology while advancing formal realism is so precarious that even religious readers seem to have overlooked the most visible evidence of divine justice and supernatural intervention in Richardson’s oeuvre, the apparition that appears before Lovelace, an oversight that annoyed Richardson himself. “See him [Lovelace] in his following Delirium [with] Spectres before his eyes,” he tells Edward Moore; “[h]ave I not then given rather a dreadful than a hopeful Exit, with respect to Futurity, to the unhappy Lovelace!” (Selected 122). Despite Richardson’s preferred reading, the multiplied uncertainties—are the spectres Clarissa surrounded by angels, or Lovelace’s spurned
The interpretive challenge began with Richardson’s unlikely rags-to-riches story of *Pamela*. Henry Fielding lambasted Richardson for offering an improbably happy ending while getting away with his own, writes Martin Battestin, because Richardson’s “novel asks to be taken as a faithful (even in a pious sense) representation of actuality” whereas *Tom Jones* was positioned “as a work of Art, as paradigm and emblem of that wise Design which Pope celebrated” (161). If Fielding represents God’s benevolent disposition toward man without implying, through mimetic exactness, that happiness will be achievable on earth, in real life. Richardson, on the other hand, represents his happy ending naturalistically, while simultaneously placing Pamela in both a providential narrative and a “comic romance, whose social logic must not be imperilled by her complete plausibility” (Eagleton 35). This confusion of genres preserves reward, but strains credulity and invites satire.

*Clarissa*, by comparison, is a remarkable leap of faith as Richardson risks putting providence into question by denying a traditional kind of poetic justice. It is much easier to represent God rewarding virtue and punishing evil by offering material prizes for prudent living—by elevating a Pamela in rank, financial security, and marital status as a picture of God’s ultimate judgment. Clarissa’s moral of “virtue rewarded after death,” has

---

99 Richardson never could quite pin down unruly interpretations. “The perverse tendency of women readers such as Lady Bradshaigh to go on liking Lovelace even after his full character was revealed was addressed in [Richardson’s] revisions of the novel for the second, third and fourth editions” (Stewart, *Eighteenth-Century* 54-5).

100 Cf. Keymer’s analysis of providential power in Fielding and Richardson (*Richardson’s* 206-08).
to be taken on credit, by assertion rather than demonstration, because verisimilitude cannot follow her presumed assumption into heaven. Who is to say that any rewarding happened at all? It is not surprising that Clarissa should have attracted varying responses, including high praise from agnostic readers and scathing criticism from the pious. As Stuber puts it, “[d]ifferent readers with different beliefs will invest the ghost with differing realities” (118). Thus, “both the supernatural and the religious elements are presented only as a possible dimension in which a reader may or may not believe” (120). Richardson can only hint and hope. Yet, as meaning is destabilized by multiple voices, Richardson’s coordination of the conversation does strongly suggest vectors of interpretation: he “makes his presence felt through the irony his story imposes upon the various correspondents. The worth or referentiality of the characters’ readings of experience is judged by what happens to them, a matter over which Richardson has some say” (Wehrs 760). In this collision and

101 Dussinger points to the supernatural proof of Lovelace’s dream as evidence for the happy ending to Clarissa’s life, but argues that her dying words only “imply her complete redemption from sin and her triumph over the mortality of the flesh” (“Conscience” 244, my emphasis). Cf. Stuber: “That Clarissa believes in God does not mean that He is actually present in the world of her novel” (119).

102 Cf. Stuber: “among Richardson’s contemporaries who admired the novel most, and who praised especially its moral and ethical impact, were people of more skeptical persuasion. Both Adam Smith and Diderot, for example, declared Richardson to be ‘the greatest moralist of all time,’ a judgment hardly consistent with their Deistic principles if they perceived his morality to be so necessarily, or even essentially, Christian” (105).

103 Having to assert a faith in the supernatural was not the problem for Richardson; the problem was his readers’ willingness to eschew the exercise. As E. Derek Taylor argues, the complexity of Clarissa, as well as Richardson’s desire to control it through the evidence of his revisions, are “signs of his commitment in Clarissa to an understanding of meaning according to which the failure to communicate truth in no way compromises its actual existence” (61).

104 Cf. Hensley: “Lovelace’s narrative, like Clarissa’s, is not the whole story, nor can a synthesis of their two separate stories make available a true whole, though each writer’s ever partial and contingent contribution necessarily contains aspects of the truth” (143).
comparison of multiple readings of experience, it is significant that both Clarissa and Lovelace, in different ways, offer witness to haunting using the idioms of apparition narratives. “If there are at least six important ways of reading Clarissa,” including the mystical, as Margaret Doody teases (77), then a spectral reading, in which invisible agency and materialist psychology uncomfortably converge, should rank near the top.

Richardson’s difference from Defoe is explainable partially by this relative open-endedness, a generic distinction between polyphonic epistolarity and retrospective first-person narration, and partially by a difference in religious approach. Whereas secret intimations for Defoe could be plausible evidence of the invisible realm whose further investigation and demonstration would strengthen the claims for Christianity, for Richardson they can be a confirmation only of faith already established. Eliza Haywood had articulated a similar doctrine at about the same time in her journalistic sequel to Addison and Steele, The Female Spectator (1745). In response to a letter from “A.B.” about the posthumous appearance of the Dutchess of Mazarine, the Female Spectator says she approves of spirits but warns that due to so many false stories, “did the whole Proof of the Immortality of the Soul rest in this Article, the Number of those who place their Summum Bonum in this World, would be greatly increas’d” (382). Spirits are not an apologetics proof, then. As A.B. asserts, supernatural appearances ought not be used “to gratify the vain Curiosity of those who doubt a future State, but to strengthen the Faith of those who believe in it” (381).

Because the supernatural is cast in this equivocal, secondary role, Clarissa’s dismissal of spiritual second causes is peripheral to Richardson’s moral design, contributing to the occultation of supernatural suggestion. Richardson wanted to highlight
more visible and replicable behavior. Again, “[t]housands of my sex are more nice than I,” Clarissa says, “for they would have avoided the devious path I have been surprised into” (595). As we have seen, such rigid didactic lessons frequently escape Richardson’s control, but the motive for Richardson’s restrained invisible realm is apparent enough: restricting exposure to dangerous situations by using one’s own sanctified reasoning is safer and less presumptuous than depending on the intervention of benevolent spiritual messages. As much as Richardson wished to promote a Christian cosmology, he was not Richard Baxter redivivus.

His fictions participated centrally in the spectral society of print, however. Like Robinson Crusoe and Mr. Spectator, Richardson’s characters carried on a ghostly existence in reader’s imaginations: correspondents pleaded tearfully for Lovelace, despite his villainy, while Benjamin Slocock recommended Pamela from the pulpit. Villagers even rang church bells at the news of Pamela’s wedding. Anecdotes like these “are usually cited with condescension,” write Thomas Keymer and Peter Sabor, but the broad social circulation of Richardson’s characters was savvy viral media, “worth whole bales of conventional newspaper advertisement” (40, 25). Alternate publication venues, including Robinson Crusoe’s London Daily Evening Post, made the novel accessible to lower-class readers, and “one can see how the intimate reality effect of Richardson’s fiction must have been enhanced by the rhythms of serialization” (40). His fictional persons were “a multimedia affair” (Eagleton 5), and they were deeply personal beings, beloved invisible agents of eighteenth-century print and epistolary culture.

105 McKillop summarizes the story of Pamela’s church bells (passim), and Thomas Keymer and Peter Sabor trace the celebration to at least two locations (39).
While Richardson’s muted supernaturalism did not augur a robust future for the subtle representation of “real” spiritual impressions in narrative fiction, the aura of haunting in his language, psychology, and fictionality would prove a lasting revenant. The sensation of spectral agency inside characters’ thoughts and outside the page in broader society revealed the fantastic as modern mode of cognition during crisis. The appearance of Gothic fiction a few decades later attested to an emigration of spirits from the novel’s mainline rather than an unheralded species of supernatural affect. Gothic novelists paraded spiritual beings (or their believable decoys), but they were interested in the supernatural primarily as a tool of investigating the mind, how it would feel if one could believe in spiritual beings. The Gothic was not a surprising return of the repressed in English fiction, but a sign of enlightenment. It embraced a supernatural phenomenology that had already been explored, but excluded the empirical apologetics proofs of spiritual cosmology, and so demystified the supernatural. Haunting would reemerge all the more viscerally, however, with the Americanized Gothic innovations of Richardson’s major admirer, Charles Brockden Brown, whose narrative indeterminacy spectralizes material reality itself.
4. Gothic Continuity, Gothic Disruption

When Pamela flees from an erotically inflamed Mr. B., she obliquely invokes invisible aid, quoting *Hamlet*: “I said, like as I had read in a Book a Night or two before, Angels, and Saints, and all the Host of Heaven, defend me!” (29). While neither hosts of heaven nor specters appear here, spirits float through Richardson’s fiction in the language of equivocal impulses and forebodings. Two decades later, the hero of Horace Walpole’s Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), invokes *Hamlet* to new effect. “Angels of grace, protect me! cried Frederic, recoiling” from a colder interlocutor: “the figure, turning slowly round, discovered to Frederic the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton” (157).106

The supernatural intrusion veers sharply from Richardson’s subtlety, but Walpole feels the same need for reality effect. He borrows “the personage of a translator” (65) to grant this and other events of his medieval story a degree of verisimilitude: “I cannot but believe, that the ground work of the story is founded on truth” (61).107 English narrative of the eighteenth century was possessed by hints of mysterious agency and by phantasmal flesh-and-blood characters. What Catherine Gallagher calls “the English novel’s

106 The terror of this discovery, it should be noted, is suspect. Calling Walpole’s characters “posturing puppets,” David Punter says “Manfred’s behaviour reminds us of Hamlet’s only so that we can smile at its comparative inadequacy and, indeed, the insignificance of the ghost” (45, 46). Robert B. Hamm, Jr, however, argues that Walpole draws on a specific vocabulary of eighteenth-century acting theory as “shorthand for conveying very specific physical responses” to supernatural experiences, and attempts to exhibit “novelistic discourse as a medium capable of surpassing the theater’s technical limits and providing the reader a private and more intensely terrifying experience” (674).

107 These two quotations are from the novel’s second and first prefaces, respectively. Walpole issued the second preface to excuse his ruse of translation.
discovery of fiction through probable narration” worked, paradoxically, by means of spectral belief, even for “materialistic” stories (340).

The first Gothic novelists mobilized this spectrality towards the overtly supernatural, but the genre was more than a medium for phantoms. At the end of the century, American Charles Brockden Brown, in a new country with its own history and frightening frontiers, forged a mode of Gothic narrative that resists spiritual and rational explanations alike. In *Wieland; or, the Transformation* (1798), plot does not rely on Walpole’s apparitions or Ann Radcliffe’s banditti disguised as ghosts, but on the subjection of the material world to the uncertainties of the demonological fantastic. Registering over a century of different approaches to invisible agency, Brown innovates based on their shared resource: the teleology of plot, with or without spiritual beings. The narrative model of providential oversight of the world yields to a ventriloquistic model in which voices and identities become hopelessly confused.

*The Map of Otranto and Cock Lane*

Whereas Richardson and other eighteenth-century Christian storytellers touched the invisible realm lightly, feeling unable to verify its modes of communication with indisputable empirical evidence, most Gothic novelists jettisoned the burden of empirical proof by rendering a no-longer-invisible realm. They emphasized the simulated effect of supernatural fear rather than the subtle suggestion of “real” spirits in modern life. The difference can be seen in the contrast between Samuel Johnson’s sober, juridical approach to investigating the Cock Lane Ghost and Walpole’s account of Cock Lane as a species of live theater, “not an apparition, but an audition” (*Yale* 6). The contrast is
reflected in their literary productions. Three years before Cock Lane, in Johnson’s *Rasselas*, Pekuah scrupled to enter a tomb for fear of the dead, her belief endorsed theoretically by Imlac the wise (there “is no people, rude or learned, among whom apparitions of the dead are not related and believed”) but never verified practically by actual visitation (116). Two years after Cock Lane, Walpole boldly presented skeletons and giant phantoms to readers of *The Castle of Otranto*.

It was partly because “example” in realistic narrative might “take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will,” that Johnson, Defoe, Addison, and others could only speculate and hint about invisible beings (Johnson, *Rambler* 1: 22). Breaking verisimilitude and thereby destroying subtle proofs of invisible influence would be bad enough, but Walpole’s ghosts might fuel lurid desire for its own sake regardless of didactic intent, recalling Glanvill’s warning against a “delight in telling Stories” about apparitions (63). Freed from the need to filter supernatural content through the legitimizing sieve of Royal Society demonology, Gothic novelists openly indulged this narrative “delight” on the road to the willing suspension of disbelief.

Yet Walpole’s description of *Otranto* “as a matter of entertainment” did not spell the triumph of a disenchanted, rational worldview (60). Catherine Morland in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) would demonstrate—as Charlotte Lennox’s Arabella had done in *The Female Quixote* (1752)—that supernatural narrative could still “take possession of the memory.” Even “an appended Radcliffean explanation” could not “undo the real fears that the reader and protagonist previously endured” (Davidson 225), and as Terry Castle notes, the sentimental heart in Radcliffe is prone to haunting from “spectral images of
those one loves,” in what she calls “the supernaturalization of everyday life” (123).

Walpole tacitly recognizes that the distinctions between simulated fear and real belief were thin. Acting as “translator” in the first preface, he claims that while supernatural beliefs “are exploded now,” this “was not the case when our author wrote” (6). Walpole knew from his own experience at Cock Lane that modern society was quite prepared to credit supernatural appearances, so “when our author,” Walpole himself, wrote, it both was and “was not the case” that spirits were exploded. He exploited lingering credulity as he ridiculed it.

The role of the invisible realm in fictional belief transcended debates about spirits. From its earliest experiments, the novel traded in the psychology of the haunted mind, a haunting that drives plot. The very logic of plot, argues Jesse Molesworth, operates by a “magic of teleology” whereby “events occur according to narrative causes,” shaping reality’s “relentless flow of information and energy” into significance (7, 6). In this way any plot is irrational, whether “supernatural” or “realistic,” since both modes “imbue coincidence with the fateful atmosphere of the uncanny” (238). Robinson Crusoe typifies, at the very outset of “the novel,” the retrospective interpretation of a designing hand, and all narratives perform this work, whether or not the teleology is spiritual. The supernatural revelation of lowly Theodore as heir to the throne of Otranto is no more miraculous than the revelation of Tom Jones as relation and heir to Squire Allworthy. Plot points events to well-designed ends.

Alert to this fiction-making, Charles Brockden Brown disrupted the manufacture of causes and effects. While Wieland gives the appearance of a happy, or at least peaceful, ending, it is anything but conclusive. “Clara’s new-found tranquility ultimately
rests on the same unpredictable logic of impressions that led to her tragedy in the first place,” so order is “restored as arbitrarily and indefinitely as it was destroyed” (Cahill 180). Brown leaves the reader questioning the moral of the story, its agent of evil, the explanation of its mysterious events, even the reliability of its narrator. Wieland is really “Why-Land.” For this pervasive atmosphere of doubt, Brown draws not only on Gothic affect and a demonological lexicon of spiritual communications, but also on contemporary scientific literature about strange physical phenomena. Skepticism is the reigning tone, and it skewers Defoe’s active spirits, Addison’s and Richardson’s melancholic optimism, Young’s redeemed night thoughts, and even Henry Fielding’s mockery of superstition. The Transformation of Brown’s subtitle is apropos, as Brown denatures fictional belief by making plots invisible within the visible realms of everyday life.

“What is the inference to be drawn from these facts?”

For many Gothic novelists, spirits were a means to an end: “supernatural appearances provide correlatives for emotional distress, underlining uncertainty” (Spacks, Novel 193). The giganticism of Walpole’s ghosts, says Cynthia Wall, can be seen “as a sort of inverse objective correlative to the sizing of the characters and as a metaphorically realistic measure of the presence of things” (118). Supernatural presences could serve in these symbolic roles because they were historically cordoned off, safely disposed by Radcliffe’s “supernatural explained” or Walpole’s over-the-top spectacle. For Brown, on the other hand, “supernatural appearances” were an enduring, modern phenomenon, no more shifty or illusive than the material world itself (and coextensive with it). Debunking
belief in an invisible realm, Brown also cast doubt on materialist certainties, rendering contemporary life a thoroughly fantastic affair, with or without spirits.

_Wieland_ tracks a destructive series of strange events, beginning with the spontaneous combustion of Clara and Theodore’s father, continuing with the antagonist’s uncanny ventriloquism, and concluding with Theodore’s murder of his own family on the mysterious prompts of ventriloquistic suggestion and divine “inspiration.” In this bizarre story, false visions and whispered hints drive Brown’s plot, as Clara speaks frequently of “impressions” and “impulses,” oscillating with physiology and spirituality. Clara says the ventriloquist Carwin leaves “a deep impression on my fancy” (59), mimicking the transmission of spiritual impressions across the medium of imagination and “perhaps altering her associations and capacity for judgment and changing the course of her life” (Cahill 179).

Brown frontloads Lockean associations in the novel’s opening paragraph, however, as Clara declares that her tale “will exemplify the force of early impressions, and show the immeasurable evils that flow from an erroneous or imperfect discipline” (5). She illustrates with her father’s biography. Orphaned at an early age and apprenticed to a merchant, Wieland leads a cramped life, relieved only by irregular education. In a moment of Crusoevian Bibliomancy, he alights on a quotation from Scripture in a book by an enthusiastic Camisard, “Seek and ye shall find,” and he is hooked by natural predisposition: “His mind was in a state peculiarly fitted for the reception of devotional sentiments” (8). This book then guides Wieland’s journey through the Bible, linking together a faulty chain of associations in his mind.
His constructions of the text were hasty, and formed on a narrow scale.
Every thing was viewed in a disconnected position. One action and one
precept were not employed to illustrate and restrict the meaning of
another. (9)

Clara’s judgment reads like a critique of Gothic hermeneutics, the same “narrow scale” of
interpretation having contributed to the narrative possession of both Lennox’s *Female
Quixote* Arabella and Austen’s Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. But despite
Clara’s attempts to avoid the same error by assigning material causes to her father’s
strange theological persuasions, a hint of the invisible appears in his developing sense of
spiritual duty.

Feeling an urge to preach to unbelievers, Wieland at first puts off a journey to
America for fear of the unknown. Yet, he “found it impossible wholly to shake off the
belief that such was the injunction of his duty,” and he “formed a resolution of complying
with what he deemed the will of heaven” (10). Wieland’s natural desire for safety
conflicts with a mysterious impulse, suggesting split agency, and Clara characteristically
psychologizes rather than theologizes the latter as “what he deemed the will of heaven,”
citing the force of Lockean impressment: in America, “new objects, new employments,
and new associates appeared to have nearly obliterated the devout impressions of his
youth.” Eventually, elder Wieland’s latent “sense of duty” reawakens him to missionary
work, but repeated failures among the Amerindians wear him down into a solitary,
devotional life (11). This leads to the novel’s first major mystery. Feeling that the “duty
assigned to him was transferred, in consequence of his disobedience, to another,”
Wieland expects condign punishment:
His imagination did not prefigure the mode or the time of his decease, but was fraught with an incurable persuasion that his death was at hand. He was likewise haunted by the belief that the kind of death that awaited him was strange and terrible. (13)

This belief is firmly in the neighborhood of subtler spiritual realms, more Baxter than Walpole, as he is haunted by a “persuasion” (which Clara cannot help attributing to illness), rather than a detailed “prefiguration.” The combination of vague premonition with unassailable certainty could have come straight from Baxter’s Mr. Tyro, who died only months after the “Impression” of an imprecise but psychologically irresistible voice predicted his demise (200).

Was Wieland’s imagination registering a message from the invisible realm? Or was melancholia creating a self-fulfilling prophecy? Shortly after his complaint, Wieland’s agony becomes acute, and he tells his wife that his end will come shortly. He rises for midnight prayers at an outdoor temple as Clara’s mother waits anxiously at her bedroom window:

Her eyes were fixed upon the rock; suddenly it was illuminated. A light proceeding from the edifice, made every part of the scene visible. A gleam diffused itself over the intermediate space, and instantly a loud report, like the explosion of a mine, followed. She uttered an involuntary shriek, but the new sounds that greeted her ear, quickly conquered her surprise. They were piercing shrieks, and uttered without intermission. The gleams which had diffused themselves far and wide were in a moment withdrawn, but the interior of the edifice was filled with rays. (16)
The light seems to exert a power independent of human agency, though the novel is quick to offer natural explanations. A footnote at chapter’s end, in the same scientific editorial voice of Brown’s “Advertisement,” references a “case, in its symptoms exactly parallel to this” in a Florentine journal, as well as “similar cases” (19). It is not a definitive explanation, however, as rational answers unravel in Clara’s accumulation of details.

Wieland survives long enough to recount a few confused memories: “a faint gleam suddenly shot athwart the apartment. His fancy immediately pictured to itself, a person bearing a lamp” (18). He feels struck in the arm, and his clothes take fire. Clara’s uncle, the witness to Wieland’s explanation, senses something more, and is “inclined to believe that half the truth had been suppressed.” Without that critical half, Clara muses, what is the inference to be drawn from these facts? […] I was at this time a child of six years of age. The impressions that were then made upon me, can never be effaced. […] Was this the penalty of disobedience? this the stroke of a vindictive and invisible hand? Is it a fresh proof that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects and commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submission to his will? Or, was it merely the irregular expansion of the fluid that imparts warmth to our heart and our blood, caused by the fatigue of the preceding day, or flowing, by established laws, from the condition of his thoughts? (19)

In a paragraph composed entirely of relentlessly expanding questions, Clara rehearses a wide range of debate about mysterious experience, ranging from “fresh proof” of divine influence (the same tag Charles Gildon had jeeringly applied to Crusoe’s evidence of
invisible agency) to “established laws” of mechanical nature. The physiology of flowing blood courses against the theology of commissioned spiritual agents and the stroke of “a vindictive and invisible hand,” leaving what we might call meta-impressions that “can never be effaced.” Are Clara’s impressions of her father’s impressions founded on his faulty education, his physiological distempers, or a supernatural cause? Clara’s “many unanswered queries serve to dispel the confidence that many of Brown’s educated contemporaries had in Lockian epistemology” (Elliott xxv). Her questions are also the reader’s, not settled by demonology or the scientific footnote about spontaneous combustion, different modes of knowledge vying for the last word, even in the presentation of the (para)text.

Brown seeds his plot with clues to the mystery of invisible agency across other strange events. The most crucial is pitch-perfect mimicry of human voices by ventriloquist Carwin. Introducing himself to Clara’s idyllic community (including her brother Theodore’s family and Henry Pleyel, her love interest) at about the same time inexplicable voices begin to emerge at night, Carwin looks uncouth, though all recognize his nobility of voice. Unfortunately, none connect his verbal abilities with this strange vocal mobility. The peace of all is destroyed when Pleyel, having discovered that Carwin is an escaped convict, believes he overhears Carwin and Clara in a late night tryst—pitch perfect plotting on Carwin’s part.

Carwin fits several Gothic types, including a mysterious past connected with the “superstitious” Roman Catholic countries Ireland and Spain (his Cornish name means “white castle” [Arthur 92]), but he is “hard to place as a typical gothic villain” (Haggerty 227). He “has been put in the tradition of Caleb Williams, and of Schedoni in Radcliffe’s
The Italian; he has been called a ‘utopian villain’ and a ‘Richardsonian seducer’” (Lyttle 262), and Michael Gilmore casts Carwin as Satan in his account of Wieland as American re-telling of Paradise Lost (112-114). Yet, Shirley Samuels offers a defense of Carwin as potential “champion or hero” who exposes the inadequacies of both “the inspired Wieland” and “the rationalist Pleyel” (55). His violence is epistemological rather than physical—he operates by gas-lighting his victims—and malicious intent is never established, so Carwin’s character is as much an interpretive mystery as his art of mimicry. How is one to read villainy among the novel’s multiplying voices? Is there even an antagonist to be found?

Leigh Eric Schmidt traces the trajectory of ventriloquism from a phenomenon “as strange and difficult to be conceived as any thing in Witchcraft” according to Glanvill, to its gradual demystification in the early nineteenth century into “a form of rational entertainment” (136). At Brown’s time of writing, ventriloquism exposed “the dangerously protean qualities of the self because the voice had long been considered one of the dependable markers of identity” (170). Since this bizarre world of the fragmenting individual (if some other human can mimic my voice perfectly, who am I?) renders sensory impressions suspect, rational correctives must be employed to avoid misjudgment.

Schmidt cites America’s foremost medical doctor, Benjamin Rush, who advocated using one sense to verify another in matters seemingly supernatural. Hearing “could be trusted, but only under a system of vigilant management—that is, with the senses trained to monitor one another, with reason disciplined against superstitious judgments” (167). This work of mutual correction is what Clara finds missing in her
father’s Biblical hermeneutics: “One action and one precept were not employed to illustrate and restrict the meaning of another.” Yet, Clara fails to discipline herself adequately against superstitious hypotheses based on strange sounds alone, and even the rational Pleyel fails to “[compare] the evidence of sight with that of hearing” (L. Schmidt 166). The result is tragedy.108

Brown, however, denies his characters the stabilizing promise of empiricism by overturning its assumptions. Probability and emulation were cornerstones of the Lockean pedagogy Clara champions, but as Thomas Koenigs shows, exemplarity can blind people to less common—though equally viable—causes for material phenomena. When Clara complains that her “fate is without example” (189), Koenigs argues, “no education could have prepared her for this experience because no one could have provided her with a model to imitate or even with the knowledge of a comparable situation” (724). As Clara herself declares in the opening chapter, if “my testimony were without corroborations, you would reject it as incredible. The experience of no human being can furnish a parallel” (6). No wonder Pleyel mistakes the voices of Carwin and Clara for evidence of clandestine relations. No examples from his experience could have suggested mimicry as the agent. As Clara gets “spectralized,” her voice is separated from her body and her defense accounted “marvellous” because lacking “alibi witnesses” (Ruttenberg 236). Clara at the outset attempts to insulate the reader, “you,” from Pleyel’s mistake by asserting her unparalleled testimony: “Listen to my narrative, and then say what it is that has made me deserve to be placed on this dreadful eminence” (6). Clara sets her auditors

108 “In this transformed world both freedom of rational inquiry and the enthusiast’s belief in religious determinism lead to fatal consequences” (Fliegelman 240).
up, implying that they will be just as unable to answer “what it is” that moves the plot of
the novel.

The role of the witness in Clara’s narrative testimony shifts from building a case
for a pattern (as in Defoe’s or Glanvill’s cataloging of common supernatural traits shared
across different apparition accounts) to verifying the singular event, the exception, the
experience without “parallel.” This critique of exemplarity strikes at the heart of
eighteenth-century novelistic representation, and mysterious agency in particular. The
example, as something “parallel” to common experience and imitable, even if
unachievable, helped authors strengthen claims to verisimilitude and gave them a moral
warrant for their fictions. Clarissa is the exemplary example, in America as well as
England, but the public acclaim of her role as model irked Brown. In his “Objections to
Richardson’s Clarissa,” Brown praises the heroine “as a portrait of human nature,” but
critiques the presence of “defects in a portrait intended to be, or considered as being, a
pattern for our imitation” (323, 322). Clarissa, he says, was too deferential to
unreasonable parents and too willing to welcome death when duty enjoined resignation.
Brown lets neither problem ensnare Clara (though the latter tempts her), seeming to offer
his heroine as a Clarissa revised, defect-free. Yet her experience is not imitable. “Brown
enacts his revision of Clarissa in such a way that it forecloses the possibility of reading
Clara as a new exemplar, a replacement Clarissa” (Koenigs 722). Clara’s decision-
making does not save or elevate her—“It is true that I am now changed; but I have not the
consolation to reflect that my change was owing to my fortitude or to my capacity for
instruction” (235)—and her life is too strange to offer a pattern or “furnish a parallel” for
someone else.
Disrupting the economy of exempla reconfigures the role of the supposed supernatural. Defoe had heaped up practical examples of spiritual converse in *Robinson Crusoe*, which he later buttressed with Biblical examples and with examples by witness report. Yes, the spiritual realm could be ambiguous, but what is salient in Defoe’s treatment is practical applicability. When Crusoe, as stand-in for everyman, demonstrates the value of obeying a “secret Dictate; though I knew no other Reason for it, than that such a Pressure, or such a Hint hung upon my Mind,” he makes sure to add a note on the force of exemplarity: “I could give many Examples of the Success of this Conduct in the Course of my Life” (*Life* 186). The narrative *Robinson Crusoe* is a casebook of such examples. Likewise, though Clarissa is not as doctrinaire as Crusoe, her increasing attention to hints and impulses presents a viable example of invisible influence for readers predisposed to believe. And when Lovelace beholds an apparition on his deathbed, it serves to support divine justice—the teleology of the plot—whether or not it is a “real” ghost.

*Wieland* advances no such confidence. Clara, “impressed upon” as she is by the strange events which claimed her father’s life, cannot escape from supernatural inferences that seem probable but prove misleading. When Pleyel tries to convince her that the voices everyone is hearing are a human contrivance, she resists the suggestion: “Such is possible, but there are twenty other suppositions more probable” (36). Her brother later concurs, in much the same language: “Even in some of the facts which were related by Carwin [about ventriloquism], he maintained the probability of celestial interference” (75). Carwin himself, in gamely laying before them the evidence of his own ventriloquism, says of divine communication “that such intercourse was probable”; he
merely points to “many instances somewhat similar” to theirs, which were not “perfectly exempted from the suspicion of human agency” (74). It is one of Carwin’s most Lovelacean moments. Instead of boasting secretly to his confidant that he will replace “Baxter’s History of Spirits and Apparitions” with “Lovelace’s Reveries,” Carwin openly mocks confidence in spiritual communication founded on probability by deviously supporting it.

When Clara clings to “probable” supernatural explanations, they are anything but examples to be followed. One night she discovers Carwin hiding in her closet and believes a heavenly voice protects her from violence. In reality, Carwin had used ventriloquism to devise an escape. After he departs, Clara remains awake and eventually hears footsteps cross the house. Believing the invisible realm had already played a part in the night’s adventures, she holds to this inference, with a hint of Pamela’s flight from Mr. B.: “It was an impulse of which I was scarcely conscious, that made me fasten the lock and draw the bolts of my chamber door” (97). The steps stop at her bedroom, there is an attempt at the locked handle, and then the sound of another door slamming shut. Clara thinks she has averted disaster through the imposition of this impulse, but in reality, the footsteps were Pleyel’s. Little did either know that Carwin had just fooled Pleyel by simulating Clara’s voice. Had Clara resisted the impulse and opened the door to Pleyel, Carwin’s illusion would have been exposed and heartache averted.

Not only do impulses fail to help, but Clara also begins to act in opposition to them. Much later, Clara hears the projected voice, “hold! hold!” and muses, the “intimation was imperfect: it gave no form to my danger, and prescribed no limits to my caution. I had formerly neglected it, and yet escaped. Might I not trust to the same issue?”
In a reversal of Robinson Crusoe’s spiritual education and Clarissa’s eventual resignation to premonitions, Clara learns to disobey intimations through her characteristic method of questioning. Her brother Theodore, meanwhile, learns to attend all too well. Imbibing the enthusiastic example of his father, Theodore almost despairs at the absence of divine communication in his life until something beams a vision (whether supernatural or psychological we are never completely certain) and then spiritual confidence becomes a terror: Theodore believes an angel requires the sacrifice of his family.

Brown’s critique of exemplary spectral evidence reflects the skeptical methodology of ventriloquism analyst Jean-Baptiste de La Chapelle, whom Brown quotes approvingly in a footnote. To debunk superstition, writes Leigh Eric Schmidt, “La Chapelle did not need to view the possessed or the inspired; instead, all he required was close observation of an impish illusionist. That was a fateful shift of perspective” (145). If a supernatural effect could be counterfeited, no need to consider myriad stories of spiritual agency to discern a pattern as Defoe did. Merely possibilistic physical explanation trumps any supernatural probabilities, “a fateful shift” indeed.

Yet, in debunking Clara’s and Theodore’s superstitious suppositions, Wieland does not resolve into a simple case of Radcliffe’s “supernatural explained.” Materialistic interpretations themselves remain incomplete. Most notably, there is never a definitive explanation for Theodore’s mania. At first, Clara believes it is a direct result of Carwin’s malign illusions, but Carwin argues eloquently that he did not ventriloquize a message of

---

109 “At some point, Brown appears to be saying in his novel, a firm belief in natural causes is just not going to be enough to account for all of the effects that one’s senses register” (Verhoeven 98).
murder (and Clara eventually believes him). His admitted willingness to trick, lie, and snoop hardly builds a strong character witness, but assuming Carwin is telling the truth, the psychological explanation of Wieland’s madness raises more questions than it answers. Did Carwin’s earlier ventriloquism set Theodore’s mind askew? Or did the “impressions” cast by his father’s mysterious death? Can enthusiasm be passed genetically? Is there a fate or invisible agency in this after all? In a Gothic transmission, Clara’s questions become the reader’s, producing a community of debate that continues to this day.

Adding to the atmosphere of doubt, Brown has Clara’s testimony to these strange events contaminated by her unreliability. Scholars have long recognized that Clara’s shifting and subjective perspective on the different happenings in the novel renders her account problematic. It is “a hopeless undertaking to search for clearly defined causes and intentions in Wieland, the more so as the various explanations are all filtered through the narrator’s mind” (Hagenbüchle 128). Moreover, Clara’s predilection to supernatural explanation is perhaps a sign of her inheritance of the Wieland family enthusiasm. What is less recognized, however, is the subtle infusion of the Defoevian fantastic, not through

---

110 While many critics ascribe indirect blame to Carwin for Theodore’s madness—Jeffrey Weinstock, for example, concedes “a precipitating factor,” but insists that “the voice of God heard by Wieland was neither God nor Carwin but rather the voice of the other within” (103)—Laura Korobkin goes farthest in arguing that Carwin actually supplied the instructions to kill, out of a sense of curiosity about his ventriloquistic power (729-732). The debate about Carwin’s direct role in the murders is an old one. Bernard Rosenthal writes that most early critics “took Carwin’s guilt for granted,” but twentieth-century critics were (with notable exceptions) more skeptical; Rosenthal himself argues that the very “ambiguity of the event” is “Brown at his best” (124n22, 116).

111 See Jordan, 90, for example, on Clara as unreliable narrator. William Manly notes that even early in the novel, when Clara recounts her father’s death, she cannot resist the subjective “‘Gothic’ appeal” of imagining her father’s premonitions and her mother’s feelings (314).
plot mysteries and character deception, but through Clara’s own mysterious vision, which is most noteworthy for the casualness of its introduction and dismissal.

Early in the novel, after having heard the first of the ventriloquized voices, Clara repairs to a little summer retreat by the Schuylkill River. She dozes off and dreams about being lured to an abyss by her brother, when she is wakened by that dread voice, “Hold! hold!” (62). The voice warns her that death stalks this spot but that she will be safe if she avoids it in future (the very “intimation” she later says she “neglected”). Carwin eventually admits to this imposture, but he never claims responsibility for what happens next. Clara senses impending danger but cannot bring herself to flee. Then, in this state of uncertainty, I perceived a ray flit across the gloom and disappear. Another succeeded, which was stronger, and remained for a passing moment. It glittered on the shrubs that were scattered at the entrance, and gleam continued to succeed gleam for a few seconds, till they, finally, gave place to unintermitted darkness.

[…]these gleams were such as preluded the stroke by which [my father] fell; the hour, perhaps, was the same—I shuddered as if I had beheld, suspended over me, the exterminating sword.

Presently a new and stronger illumination burst through the lattice on the right hand, and a voice, from the edge of the precipice above, called out my name. It was Pleyel. (63-64)

Like the mysterious light that accompanied her father’s death, this one retreats with the approach of another person. Like that light, it appears at the same hour—“perhaps.” It also seems to be distinct from the lantern light that Pleyel provided: “[p]resently a new
and stronger illumination burst through the lattice.” But there is no explanation: as soon as Clara’s strange gleams disappear, they are never seen or mentioned again.

This scene is markedly different from the two other major scenes of strange illumination in the novel. The flashes at father Wieland’s spontaneous combustion can claim scientific precedent and eyewitness corroboration. And Theodore’s vision of a luminous angel is localized to his mind: when the vision returns to him in Clara’s presence, Clara sees nothing (so the reader is led to assume that both of his visions are internal). Only Clara’s flitting rays are uncorroborated by either rational explanation or second witness. Are they Carwin’s contrivance? Some kind of natural illusion? A supernatural portent similar to that which “preluded” her father’s death? A sign of Clara’s own vulnerability to the Wieland madness/enthusiasm? There is too little information for judgment, an absence that recapitulates the central problem of the novel.112 The material world is as mysterious as the invisible realm, and people must operate under this haunted sensibility, whether it originates from “the alien[…] already within,” or from forces without (Samuels 60). As Cynthia Jordan argues, “all reasoning is shown to be fictitious, mere storytelling,” to the point that storytelling itself becomes the one comfort to Clara, granting her the ability to delay the conclusions which prove faulty again and again (Jordan 85).

Brown’s fictional universe blends the climates of Defoe, Walpole, and Radcliffe into something new altogether. Brown does not use the “scientific” to analyze and categorize the supernatural as Glanvill and Defoe do, nor does he disenchant ghosts by

112 Bernard Rosenthal sees the light as either Clara’s imagination run astray—and “then why trust her observations or her history elsewhere?”—or a machination of Carwin’s, potentially implicating him in her father’s death (111).
relegating them to an aesthetic category as the Gothic novelists do. Rather, he sustains a disturbing irony in which the rational and the supernatural nearly merge. Clara’s account of her father’s death seems spectral precisely because its details cleave so closely to the scientific account that Brown footnotes. Bill Christophersen writes of the spontaneous combustion that “one detail jars: his arm has been smashed. […] Would Brown have us believe that is how spontaneous combustion works?” (43). Markman Ellis, tracing the source of Brown’s footnote, finds that this is exactly how it worked. The Florentine journal’s spontaneous combustion includes all the major details of Wieland’s death: a loud explosion, shrieking, a light that retreated as help advanced, and the rapid putrefaction of the body. Most strikingly, the poor victim, Don Bertholi, “had felt a stroke, as if somebody had given him a blow over the right arm with a large club” (qtd. in Ellis 126). Clara’s circumstantial detail, which seems idiosyncratic to the point of mystery, actually supports the materialistic explanation of Wieland’s death.

Despite this congruent material detail, contemporary readers were resistant to its force of explanation. Brown’s friend William Dunlap felt that spontaneous combustion was “so rare, that a work, whose events are founded on such materials, accords less with popular feelings and credulity, than if supernatural agency had been employed,” and compared it to the similarly disappointing “waxen doll” of Radcliffe’s Udolpho (qtd. in Ellis 125, 126). Dunlap’s critique highlights how amenable “supernatural agency” is to novelistic representation (and as I have been arguing, always had been), while papering

113 Haggerty argues for a similar kind of convergence at Wieland’s final death scene: “domestic violence shatters the gothic by undoing its usual distance and making it impossible to distinguish between domestic experience and gothic experience” (230).
114 Rosenthal likewise points to the blow on the arm as an unexplained puzzle for spontaneous combustion, but a probable indicator of human assault (106-107).
over what makes Brown so disturbing. Radcliffe’s “waxen doll” restored rational order to
the world by revealing the Gothic trickery concealed behind the curtain, like a magician’s
illusion. Brown hides no illusion, but openly “founds” his fiction on material events “so
rare,” that a sense of reality unravels, bringing the Gothic into the everyday.

Brown breaks apart Lockean certainty, especially education guided by
exemplarity, without tendering the comforts of the well-ordered invisible realm that
Defoe, Addison, Richardson, et al, promise in their spiritual cosmologies. The world
seems to operate without guarantee of divine order or certainty about the regularity of
physical laws. Any relief we might feel at learning God has not commanded Wieland’s
murders, as Christophersen notes, is offset by the fact that “neither has He prevented
them: rather, a slaughter of innocents has taken place unhindered in God’s name” (49).
Unlike Clarissa and Otranto, which proposed agents of infernal action as well as a final
divine justice,115 Wieland gives no clear perpetrator, only victims. It doesn’t even offer
Clara as a replacement Clarissa; only a general principle of resignation—without
Young’s redeemed night thoughts—that one must incorporate in situations quite different
from Clara’s (if a reader is to incorporate it at all).

Wieland exploits the fault lines and instabilities of the plots of justice on which
these earlier novels stand. Instead of spirits or the rational explanation behind them,
Brown offers the haunted mind; the modern mind. It is not that ghosts “simply migrate
into the space of the mind” with the rise of the Gothic, “precisely when the traditional

115 Otranto’s sense of final justice, it should be noted, is not unqualified; see Wall on the
disruption of “the apparent tidiness of patriarchal restitution” from such nigling factors
as the illogic of the supposedly fulfilled prophecy and the general ruin of the castle,
including the destruction of its walls immediately before Theodore inherits them (121).
supernatural realm was elsewhere being explained away” (Castle 135). Ghosts had long resided there, and they were never fully explained away as mere mental effect. There is nothing “simply” done in this relationship between exterior and interior spectrality, nor in the relationship of both to visible plotting in fiction.

**Conclusion: Transatlantic and Ventriloquistic Spectrality**

*Visible Plots, Invisible Realms* has argued for the centrality of spectral qualities in realistic English narrative of the long eighteenth century, from the apparitional investigations of Joseph Glanvill to the terrifying transformation wrought by Charles Brockden Brown’s fiction. I want to apply pressure on “English,” however, as language and as cultural inheritance. Brown’s translation of the Gothic from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment reflects his American context. He indicates as much in the opening note “To the Public” of *Edgar Huntly*, when he eschews “[p]uerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras” for more appropriate content such as “Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness” (4).116 The Gothic may supply compelling tropes and terms for encountering these traumas, but there is a vast array of local influences in Brown, from America’s Puritan history, to Brown’s Quaker upbringing, to Jonathan Edwards’s notion of a luminous spiritual sixth sense in his *A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God*

---

116 Goddu identifies this eschewal as a common trait in the nineteenth century: “America’s lack of gothic subjects, particularly a ruined past, is constantly remarked upon by early American writers and critics and continues to trouble authors as late as Hawthorne and James” (54). Note that pagination of *Edgar Huntly* restarts with the main text; the page referenced here is the first 4.
The division between a “British” (with its own geographic subdivisions) and an “American” imaginary was anything but clear cut, however. In much the same way that boundaries between the novel and its Gothic subgenre are blurred in my account of invisible agency, so too are transatlantic boundaries.

Is Robinson Crusoe an American novel, for example? Crusoe is clearly a figure of exchange as he shipwrecks somewhere in the West Indies and forms his own little Christian nation among natives, Spanish sailors, and English mutineers. The scientific demonological fervor of the late seventeenth century, which inspired Defoe, was itself very much an international enterprise, and one story in particular from Defoe’s *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* demonstrates the extent of a transatlantic circulation of both spiritual messages and printed ones. A London merchant sent one of his workers to Boston, and when the worker’s brother died in a fight, the merchant was astonished to receive a letter from the worker, dated a mere two weeks after the murder, asking how his brother did (158-60). It seems the man’s bloodied brother had come to his bedside one morning and named the murderer before disappearing again.

The letter’s date precludes the possibility of news having crossed the ocean first, and the long history of the story gives it credibility—as Rodney Baine shows, the worker is an identifiable individual, Joseph Beacon, whose history appeared in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* by American preacher Cotton Mather (1693, printed in Boston), was investigated in John Dunton’s London-based *Athenian Mercury* in the same year, and

---

117 For an excellent account of the American valence of “impressions” and “impulses,” and Brown’s parody of “Edwards’s theological Lockeanism which credited individuals with the sense to discriminate a false internal impression […] from a true work of God’s spirit upon the soul,” see Nancy Ruttenberg, especially 185-270 (209, 210).
was reprinted from Mather’s account in Englishman William Turner’s *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (1697) (“Daniel” 338). Spirits and their narratives criss-crossed the Atlantic. Defoe was not simply offering another rehash, however. Lending an extra tint of the uncanny, Baine convincingly argues that Defoe himself was the merchant employing Beacon. According to Chancery records, Defoe at that time had a “Boston co-partner” named Joseph Beaton, and “[d]istinguishing c and t in contemporary legal script is sometimes a difficult matter” (338). Defoe perhaps knows more than he lets on when he says he “saw the Letter within an Hour after it was receiv’d in London, read it my self, and knew the young Man’s Hand” (*Essay* 160).

Additional detail may support the theory. Earlier in the story, the merchant sees Beacon in the counting house, then after ascending his stairs, at the dining table as well (159). This eerie doubling receives no other commentary than disappointment that the merchant had not spoken to the apparitional version of Beacon in the counting house. It is a strange detail to include, with no bearing on the story except perhaps to establish a fateful mood. As Starr notes, “this incident does not satisfy [Defoe’s] own requirement that an apparition must come upon an ‘Errand of Business’ of some substance” (Defoe, *Essay* 340n223). If Defoe bends his own rules about invisible agency, it may be because the evidence comes from his own experience.

Invisible realms formed a communication network horizontally, between America and Great Britain, as well as vertically between spirits and man (and internally between man and mind). Nor was “man” the sole subject of such sophisticated discourse. As we have seen, Eliza Haywood made her own entry into apparitional apologetics in the *Female Spectator*. And the pseudonymous “Unca Eliza Winkfield” played upon the
transatlantic divide in her spiritually-inflected *Female American* (1767), a revision of the Crusoe story with a woman in the lead.

Winkfield, the daughter of an American Englishman and an Amerindian princess, attacks Crusoe at his own game. She takes a direct swipe in the Advertisement, when she claims that her true history “will descend to late posterity, when, most of its contemporaries, founded only in fiction, will have been long forgotten” (33). She even makes a greater claim for reality than Crusoe, as “the fictional granddaughter of an actual historical figure,” Edward Maria Wingfield, first president of the Virginia Colony (Burnham 24). She bests Crusoe at spiritual theory as well. Unlike Robinson, who starts his journey by sinfully rejecting his father, Winkfield is cruelly abandoned on her island after rejecting a marriage proposal. Once there, she remains pious without Defoe’s superstition. Finding comfort in accidentally opening her Greek New Testament to Hebrews 13.5 (“be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee”), she rejects Crusoe’s belief in Bibliomancy by recollecting her uncle’s advice to beware “of the practice of some enthusiasts of our times, who make the word of God literally an oracle” (59). While she does defend “particular providence” and occasionally employs Crusoe’s passive voice to describe the origin of religious ideas (“a very strange thought arose in my mind”), Winkfield avoids Defoe’s larger system of apparition theory en route to becoming an apparition operator herself (84, 83).

When European sailors, including her cousin, find their way to the island, Winkfield decides to speak with them from inside a large idol that had been constructed long ago by Amerindians. Thanks to the particular construction of the statue, her words, along with the song of an Aeolian harp she sets there, are magnified, prompting some
spectral debate on the sailors’ part. One of the sailors says, of the music, “This can be no human artifice; the loudness of it exceeds the power of art. […] I never was credulous, but henceforth I shall believe every fairy tale, if I escape this adventure” (125). Like Robert Blair’s boy whistling past the graveyard, the sailors then magnify the experience into a story about devils flying through the air, with the result that Winkfield is marooned again, though her cousin valiantly joins her. All’s well that ends well—Winkfield ends up marrying the cousin, the idol becomes a tool for helping convert the Amerindians in what we might call, at best, a pious fraud, and the whole story is judged “a wonderful series of providences” (152).

The transatlantic world remains a liminal spiritual space. Similar to Addison, Cheyne, and Young, Winkfield defends invisible agency but pushes back from overt representation. She takes a step toward Brockden Brown’s fantasticized material world when she mimics supernatural agency herself through the idol. The sailors respond naturally to probabilistic thinking when they judge that Winkfield’s amplification “exceeds the power of art” and “can be no human artifice,” the very judgment Clara and Theodore Wieland make about similar vocal mimicry. Referring both to the idol scene and to Winkfield’s general tendency to confuse voices through direct and indirect discourse, Burnham says this “narrative ventriloquism dislocates the voice of the heroine from her body, and makes it seem as if that voice – while clearly identified as hers – is nevertheless issuing from the lips of male figures” with authority (22). It is an empowering strategy that allows her “to engage in vocal performances that, if spoken more directly, might be far more open to censure.”
This empowering ventriloquism turns to terror when, under Brown’s control, it spectralizes the physical world. Winkfield can use physical means to make a rational thinker—one who “never was credulous”—ready to “believe every fairy tale.” This serves her missionary project, but for Brown, such power raises doubt about providence and mechanistic causality alike. Here too, Brown’s American context heightens the reality effect. Whereas in England the claptrap of Gothic devices—what Brown calls “Gothic castles and chimeras”—had helped establish generic fictional expectations, in America novels were new and more closely resembled the secret history or roman à clef. As Gallagher notes, “the work that is often identified as the first American novel, The Power of Sympathy (1789), is actually an instance of the earlier chronique scandeleuse form,” and one could say the same of many other notable early American novels including Charlotte Temple (1791, first printed in England) and The Coquette or, The History of Eliza Wharton (1797) (345). Moreover, the “reader of the early national period read mimetically, so much so that for many readers fiction came to have a paramount reality of its own” (Davidson 262). This local horizon of expectations—could the Wielands, readers might wonder, be a code for some contemporary family?—combined with Brown’s documentary evidence of spontaneous combustion and ventriloquism brings Gothic fear uncomfortably close to home.

The unheimlich quality of the supernatural or the seeming supernatural would become hallmarks of the nineteenth-century Gothic, on both sides of the Atlantic. Debt to the eighteenth century is sometimes acknowledged directly. In Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone (1848), servant Gabriel Betteredge prescribes Crusoemancy as the cure for
anything that ails a person. In the introduction of his witness account to the events of the novel, Betteredge notes that he had turned by accident to Crusoe’s complaint about a canoe that wouldn’t reach water—“Now I saw, though too late, the Folly of beginning a Work before we count the Cost, and before we judge rightly of our own Strength to go through with it”—and makes the obvious application to his own work of writing the witness account: “if that isn’t prophecy, what is?” (59, 61). It is more than apt that Crusoe floats like an attendant spirit over the eerie events of a novel that steps away from the Gothic world of ghosts into the technology of detective mystery. If one cannot rely on spirits to hint the best course of action, there must be some mechanism for overcoming uncertainty and unease. Why not be guided by the fantasticized Englishman making sense of a new world? “The man who doesn’t believe in Robinson Crusoe, after that, is a man with a screw loose in his understanding, or a man lost in the mist of his own self-conceit!” (132).

Any number of connections could be made between spectral beliefs and incipient Romantic literary theory, but I turn to Walter Scott as aptest interlocutor to send off invisible realms in visible plots. Scott’s Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft (1830) makes an implicit case for realistic narrative as perfect ground for belief, because it “naturally” recruits features of juridical discourse without requiring its full rigor. While it would be impolite to cross-examine the witness of supernatural events, let someone ask “some unimportant question,” and the witness will generally reply with the “hasty suggestion of his own imagination, tinged as it is with belief of the general fact,” thereby giving an appearance “of minute evidence which was before wanting” (356). The idiosyncrasy grants a flavor of the real.
Some exploit this power. With evident admiration, Scott singles out Defoe for “rendering credible that which was in itself very much the reverse,” pointing to the wide acceptance of the Mrs. Veal story “merely from the cunning of the narrator, and the addition of a number of adventitious circumstances, which no man alive could have conceived as having occurred to the mind of a person composing a fiction” (392). Scott could easily have included Walpole in this company. In the first preface to *Otranto*, Walpole notes that his invented “author seems frequently, without design, to describe particular parts” (61). Fiction requires evidentiary Sprezzatura; the devil really is in the details.

Technological and scientific details, like Brockden Brown’s, were particularly successful: there “is also a large class of stories […] where various secrets of Chemistry, of Acoustics, Ventriloquism, or other arts, have been either employed to dupe the spectators, or have tended to do so through mere accident and coincidence” (Scott 387). The fate of invisible realms in the eighteenth century might be summarized in this shift from providential control to ventriloquistic manipulation. For Winkfield, mimicry empowers, allowing her to evangelize through artifice, and on a deeper structural level, to express ideas that might have seemed anathema if voiced directly from her own female, half-Amerindian body. For Brown, ventriloquism spirals out of control, especially when the question of responsibility is raised. Carwin “creates an enduring uncertainty as to whether he is a representing subject or a represented object, the author of evil or the emplotted character” (Ruttenberg 216-17). Do his manipulations direct the tragedy, or is Carwin himself swept along by the forces ventriloquism has unleashed? Every “quest” in the novel, and especially the search for answers in Theodore’s enthusiasm and murders,
“partakes of the paradigmatic structure of ventriloquism: the novel funnels itself down, life by superfluous life, to its most frequently asked question – ‘Who is the author?’ – which is thrown out only to be mechanically returned by the inevitable wall” (254).

Even so, the distinction between earlier providential comforts and later ventriloquistic doubt is a shift in emphasis rather than an abrupt revolution. Glanvill and Defoe had acknowledged that the voice within was a dubious messenger—Satan could appear “transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11.14). Whose thoughts were their active imaginations really voicing? And in a version of belles-lettres ventriloquism, Clarissa’s devilish Lovelace intercepted and forged letters which, in Richardson, were as much a print of identity as one’s voice (recall Pamela’s sewing her papers into her undercoat [120]). Only plot could ensure the stability threatened by hidden forces, and this is what Brockden Brown obfuscates. In Wieland, there is no solid ground, no reassuring end point, only voices and interpretations. Brown’s work realizes, in fullest form, the anxiety already extant in narrative agency of the long eighteenth century.

Cynthia Wall has argued that a shared cultural storehouse of meanings enabled early modern readers to construct full landscapes in the imagination out of a few select words. Eventually, the expanding English experience of the world required a new explicitness and amplification of description. Visible Plots, Invisible Realms examines a similar cultural storehouse of shared sensory and epistemological meanings for words physical and spiritual. The vocabulary of impulses, impressions, and hints long straddled the fantastic line dividing the marvelous from the mundane, and narrative was the able medium of this balancing, its “realism” still hospitable to the apparitional, and its apparitions operating on behalf of psychological “realism.”
In time, expanding theories of mind and body would bring new interest to mysterious, external-seeming agency, requiring an elaborated examination of the storehouse of meanings, but they did not abolish a sense of the numinous. As Walter Scott shows, there was no shortage of supernatural story-tellers or auditors as late as the 1830s, and the “enlightened” had perhaps lost more than they gained when they excluded ghosts from everyday life. The haunted feelings Scott experienced as a teenager at Glamis Castle, when “the whole night scene in Macbeth’s castle rushed” into his mind, produced “a strange and indescribable kind of pleasure, the recollection of which affords me gratification at this moment” (398). But later in life, at the haunted room in Dunvegan Castle, he had to confess equal surprise with its earlier inhabitant, Dr. Johnson, “that I was not more affected”; instead, “the most engaging spectacle was the comfortable bed” (401). Scott is haunted by the lost effect of haunting, a meta-spectrality we might call nostalgia. Though ghosts may have fled his world, spectrality never did. As our own modern vogue for supernatural stories suggests, fascination for invisible realms in visible continues unabated. Haunting survives spirits to inspire not only the stories we tell, but the way we look at our world.
Works Cited

Addison, Joseph. *The Drummer; or, the Haunted-House. A Comedy*. 1716. The
Bell and Sons, 1914. 422-490. Print. 2 vols.


*Melancholy Experience in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century: Before
Depression, 1660-1800*. Ed. Allan Ingram, et al. New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

Battestin, Martin C. *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and


Bender, John. “Enlightenment Fiction and the Scientific Hypothesis.” *Representations* 61


