

Defoe's Spirits, Apparitions and the Occult

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NO ONE can say that Daniel Defoe did not enjoy what he considered to be good ghost stories and relating them in vivid terms.¹ His *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, which Defoe published in 1727, is a tribute to that fascination. Although George Starr has attempted to throw doubt on Defoe's involvement with one of the most famous of these stories, *A True Relation of the Apparition of Mrs. Veal*, the evidence summarized in the *Critical Bibliography* of P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens involves both a tradition among publishers as well as an allusion to *A True Relation* in *The Universal Spectator* of 23 November 1734 -- a journal edited and, to a great extent, written by Defoe's son-in-law, Henry Baker. As Furbank and Owens suggest, the allusion to "a skilful and learned *Apparition-Writer*" in a comment on *A True Relation* and other accounts of ghosts would seem to point to the author of *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (72–74). Indeed Baker thought that Defoe was "skilful and learned," but in 1734 few other contemporaries would have applied such words to the reviled turncoat Whig who, because of his association with *Mist's Weekly Journal*, appeared to many as a Jacobite, and whose ignorance had been proclaimed by numerous enemy pamphleteers and journalists, including Jonathan Swift.² Although there were other versions of the appearance of the ghost of Mrs. Veal,³ the author of the particular version associated with Defoe plays between a sense of the real and the spooky appearance of the ghost at exactly noon, the moment of Mrs. Veal's death (*A True Relation* 2). The very ordinariness of the encounter -- the chatty conversation between the two friends about their favorite books and details about the elbow chair and the evidence of the "scower'd" silk gown -- is what gives the narrative its power and the ability of the narrator to claim, in a Defoesque phrase, that the story involves "Matter of Fact" (*A True Relation* 11).

But for the purpose of this essay, I am most interested in Mrs. Veal's claim, "*If the Eyes of our Faith were as open as the Eyes of our Body, we should see numbers of Angels about us for our Guard*" (*A True Relation* 3). It raises the question: How did it feel to

exist in a world that was filled with invisible beings that apparently swarmed about us? Some of these spirits appeared to be benevolent, while others intended harm. It is perhaps not surprising that someone as credulous as John Aubrey believed that he lived in such a world. But it is somewhat more surprising that philosophers such as the Cambridge Platonists, still active during Defoe's youth (and still appearing in print during Defoe's old age in the translations of Thomas Burnet's work), believed in a spirit world.⁴

But what of someone like John Locke with his empirical view of experience? Surely he did not believe in such a spirit world? Nevertheless, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke maintained that although humans had to rely entirely on their five senses, it was possible that spirits might have senses that humans cannot conceive:

Hence we may take notice how much the foundation of all our knowledge of corporeal things lies in our senses. For how spirits separate from our bodies, (whose knowledge and ideas of these things are certainly much more perfect than ours), know them, we have no notion, no idea at all. The whole extent of our knowledge or imagination reaches not beyond our own ideas limited to our ways of perception. Though yet it be not to be doubted that spirits of a higher rank than those immersed in flesh may have as clear ideas of the radical constitution of substances as we have of a triangle, and so perceive how all their properties and operations flow from thence; but the manner how they come by that knowledge exceeds our conceptions. (2.160)

In short, Locke did not at all deny the existence of spirits. He merely argued that we have no way of perceiving them with our extremely limited sense of sight.

Concerning the "complex idea of an immaterial spirit," Locke argued, "And thus by putting together the ideas of thinking, perceiving, liberty, and power of moving themselves and other things, we have as clear a perception and notion of immaterial substances as we have of material" (*Essay* 1.406). And he also did not deny that "God may frame creatures with a thousand other faculties and ways of perceiving things without them than what we have" (1.405). But he then warned that it was "impossible ... for us to enlarge our very guesses beyond the ideas received from our own sensation and reflection" (1.405). Small wonder that Locke was accused of "Skepticism" by some of his contemporaries.⁵

The crucial question for contemporaries was: How is one to conduct one's life in the light of a possible world of spirits about us? In the chapter on "Enthusiasm," which Locke added to the fourth edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he warned against irrational behavior, based on the supposed presence of spiritual forces that were, in fact, beyond our powers to detect. As Swift was later to maintain at greater length and with far greater wit, the conviction of "an illumination from the Spirit of God and presently of divine authority" leads to the overwhelming impulse to convert others to such a conviction (*Essay* 2.432). Locke never proceeded

so far as to deny the possibility of a spirit world, but he maintained that human beings are to be moved by reason as “our last judge and guide in everything” (2.438). And he also argued that unlike the enthusiast, someone like Moses had “Outward signs” to acknowledge the presence of God.

Like Locke, Defoe allowed for the likelihood of spirits; and again like Locke, he warned against excessive gullibility and fear, arguing that every seeming example of the supernatural needed to stand the test of reason. But the Bible gave various examples of expansions of human sight that enabled a person to see what was previously invisible.⁶ One instance of the failure of human sight to perceive a visitor from the spirit world occurs in Numbers 22:22–35, in which the angel is perceived by the ass of Balaam, but not by Balaam himself, until he enables Balaam to see him. On the one hand, under these circumstances, an outright denial of a spirit world might have been considered blasphemous. On the other hand, warnings against enthusiasm were central to the ideology of the Court and the Church of England during the Restoration -- part of the continuing attack against the Dissenters and the various sects that had emerged during the Interregnum. That many contemporaries thought Swift had skated too close to blasphemy in his *Tale of a Tub* did not prevent the Wits from admiring his attack on the folly of allowing enthusiasm to govern one’s entire life.

The great example of a character being motivated by a sense that he was surrounded by supernatural forces is Foresight in William Congreve’s *Love for Love*. Nurses and servants were often blamed for spreading superstition,⁷ and Foresight still has his nurse alive and well to guide him. Thus when she notes that he had put his stockings on inside out, Foresight is thrilled:

Ha? How? Faith and troth I’m glad of it, and so I have that may be good Luck in troth, in troth it may, very good Luck: Nay, I have had some Omens; I got out of Bed backwards too this morning, without Premeditation; pretty good that too; but then I stumbl’d coming down Stairs, and met a Weasel; bad Omens those: some bad, some good, our lives are checquer’d, Mirth and Sorrow, Want and Plenty, Night and Day, make up our time, -- But in troth I am pleas’d at my Stocking. Very well pleas’d at my Stocking. (Congreve 236)

Foresight lives in a world in which every happening may possess a providential meaning. So preoccupied is he with what may be signs from the spirit world that he blindly allows his wife to pursue a life of complete promiscuity and seems entirely puzzled when Angelica laughingly tells him, in an astrological pun, that he is not “Lord of the Ascendant” (Congreve 237).

Defoe knew a great deal about the supernatural or the occult. How much he actually gave credence to and how much he thought to be complete hokum is difficult to say. James Sutherland thought Defoe was simply trying to make money off the devil and in his biography gave a single paragraph to the three volumes on the occult.

Sutherland either missed or (as is more likely) was not interested in the degree to which Defoe used these works to attack the various heresies of his time -- heresies that appeared to have disturbed him deeply. But sometimes, I think, there is some truth in Sutherland's skepticism. Many of the stories Defoe tells of ghosts, spirits, or of the supposed appearances of the Devil are intended to debunk the entire notion of such occult forces acting upon human beings. But it may be said that matters of the occult gave him a platform for attacking the Deists and Arians whose denial of God's immediate presence in the world and of the existence of a world of spirits made him rush to the defense of what he considered to be orthodox Christianity. The occult, then, was a grand and mysterious stage on which he could act a variety of roles.

For example, Defoe produced a number of pamphlets imitating the moodiness of those expressing second sight -- a kind of near psychotic depression well portrayed in Sir Walter Scott's *Legend of Montrose* in the character of Allan M'Aulay. In one of these supposedly prophetic pamphlets, Defoe attempted to convey this visionary state:

In my traversing the waste and barren Mounts of my Country, I see Mists crowning distant mountains, and marching to shock and engage each other, flaming Meteors dart this Way, rise, fall, shoot and flash; direct, oblique, prone, perpend, and pointing to each other: Moving Air describes in (to others invisible) small and exactly shap'd Clouds, the very Faces, Shapes, names and Distinctions of such Persons, nations, Towns, Cities and People of whom those Mists, meteors, and other Clouds repress the Action: Darkness it self forms the Posture of things by which We see, and every Cloud is filled with Hieroglyphicks for the Assistance of this uncouth attainment called *SECOND SIGHT*. (*Second-Sighted Highlander* 5)⁸

This is a near visionary moment. The master of second sight is capable of reading the cloud formations as texts reflecting the future state of world politics.

Thus as an introduction to the second vision in this work, the Highlander gives us an example of what he sees in these clouds:

After the Morning Sun rose, or the comfortless Day of Cold and Storm breaks in the howling Waste of the black High-Lands, I am call'd out to see a dancing Light dazzling and casting dismal Reflections on the Seas, made also black by boisterous Winds. What sees the Piercing Eye in the Glimmer of Mock-Day? I see there Strife and Envy; two She-Furies riding victors among the Nations of *Europe*, and filling them with the Noxious Vapours of their Stagnate Seed, impregnating the Passions, and embroiling the Councils of *Europe*. (*Second-Sighted Highlander* 7)

Who can doubt that Defoe, the writer, was enjoying himself? Never mind the predictions of the peace that was inevitably coming to Europe, what we have here is the Defoe -- the lover of sublime descriptions in poetry and prose -- who, had he

miraculously been transported to the end of the century, would doubtless have distinguished himself among the ranks of the Gothic novelists.

Near the beginning of Defoe's attention to this type of writing, in his *Review* of 12 August 1712 (9.7), Defoe engaged in a discussion of a collection of prophecies from a Highlander who was often believed to have what was called "second sight."⁹ He suspended judgment on the validity of such prophetic powers, stating, "Neither as I believe, will any Wise Man, wholly reject such Things, any more than they will too much depend upon them." He then remarked, "neither am I apt to be Enthusiastic or a Dreamer of Dreams" before recommending them for their seeming prophetic truth. Since Defoe was in fact the "Highlander" who was to write the series of prophecies from 1711 to 1715, beginning with *The British Visions* and ending with *The Second-Sighted Highlander*, the problem of approaching these works is hardly simple. Should we follow Sutherland's formula: another pamphlet, another four or five pounds added to the family budget? Or should we see in them something more serious?

The first of these prophetic pamphlets contains an element of mockery. Swift's Bickerstaff is invoked as a clue to the essential comic underpinning of the work. He reminds his readers of the complete accuracy of his former predictions as shown by the death of the astrologer, John Partridge. Partridge, of course, did not actually die, but Swift and the Wits had a wonderful time mocking the notion of prophecy.¹⁰ Defoe's "*Bickerstaff the Aged*" of *The British Visions* (1711) is associated with Scotland and second sight only by the ambiguous "*British*" of the title and the suggestive statement on the London edition, printed by John Baker, that it had originally been "Printed in the North."¹¹ But by 1713, such mockery is dropped along with Bickerstaff himself and the work emerges as by the "Second-Sighted Highlander." He is happy and free in his distant mountains and is able through his visionary powers to see what will happen in the future. As has been seen, the early prophecies are based on a reading of the configurations of the clouds, though this attempt at meteorological verisimilitude is dropped after the fifth vision.

In the final version that Defoe attempted in this series, he is moving much closer to fiction. We now have a real name for the Highlander. Not only is he no longer that object of satire, Bickerstaff, but he also has a proper Highlander name -- Archibald Mac Donald of Inverlocky.¹² His vision this time is occasioned by the eclipse of 1715, featured so prominently in the second volume of Defoe's *Family Instructor*. He is now a person capable of "sublime Illumination" as well as "sacred Raptures" (*The Second-Sighted Highlander* 3), and Defoe explores the nature of the visionary experience at considerable length. The visions presented to the reader in the pamphlet, we are told, are only a shadow of the genuine experience -- an experience which is ineluctable -- impossible to communicate in any real sense from one person to another. The true experience, we are told, is "only known to those whom this sublime Power of *Vision* is granted as a Gift from on High" (4-5). It is like a "celestial Ray of Light" (5). This time he tells us that his visions came at the highest pinnacle of

the “Mountain *Aphlec*” (6) or on a floating island in Loch Lomond at dawn.¹³ The series has become gradually more geographically specific and somewhat more vivid. Archibald Mac Donald provides both a scientific description of the moon crossing in front of the sun on the first of January 1715 and a visionary sight of the four horsemen of the apocalypse as they bring their grim influence upon Europe. There was no collected edition of Defoe to join them together, but the publisher, Baker, seems to treat them as a series with a particular audience.

How seriously are they to be taken? In the issue of the *Review* quoted previously, Defoe used the Highlander’s prediction of a plague to urge an end to the political divisions of the nation. Did Defoe, on some level, think that anything that came into his imagination might be the genuine material of prophecy? Or did he view such a medium mainly as a method of making statements about British and European politics? Or was he completely cynical, continuing the series merely because it made money for him and for John Baker, who published all of them? That they were both profitable and a good method of spreading political propaganda is true. And that Defoe could often reveal a strange mixture of cynicism and belief is equally certain. At the end of the final pamphlet of prophecies, the supposed author argues that events such as the eclipse are evidence of God’s presence in nature and that although the eclipse of 1715 may proceed from natural causes, it signifies the power of God and the folly of atheism and deism.

But Defoe would not even allow his Devil the power to see into the future. In *The Political History of the Devil*, after describing the Devil’s interest in the fate of humankind and his taking his position in the moon to better observe what was happening, Defoe argued:

From hence I took upon me to insist, that *Satan* has not a more certain Knowledge of Events than we; I say, he has not a *more certain Knowledge*; that he may be able to make stronger Conjectures and more rational Conclusions from that he sees, I will not deny; and that which he most outdoes us in is, that he sees more to conclude from than we can, but I am satisfied he knows nothing of Futurity more than we can see by Observation and Inference. (95)

Defoe flattered himself on his knowledge of history and contemporary politics and along with that pride in his understanding of such matters emerged the belief that he would be able to predict what might happen in Britain and the Continent. The *Review* is filled with such self-congratulation on his apprehension of future events. But while boasting of his powers of prediction, he denied any prophetic gifts. The second-sight pamphlets allowed him to amplify predictions based on knowledge and intelligence to the enjoyable level of magic and enchantment.

If then for Defoe these pamphlets about second sight were chiefly a vehicle for statements about some fairly obvious developments in European history, they also

allowed him to suggest a spiritual dimension in human life. Certainly he believed, with Locke, that since our senses are limited, we cannot perceive everything that is happening around us. In *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, he wrote: "For Example, were we to have the Eyes of our Souls opened through the Eyes of our Bodies, we should see this very immediate Region of Air which we breath in, throng'd with spirits, to us, blessed be god; now invisible, and which would otherwise be most frightful" (43). Such a sentiment seems to echo what Mrs. Veal said in her comments to Mrs. Bargrave (*A True Relation* 1).

Yet when he attempted a serious mood he 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, particularly as it concerns the individual. He argued that each person should look around to see if God is acting in some way to lead us in some direction. He was no Foresight, worrying about putting on his stocking the wrong way. He prided himself on his ability to argue rationally about history, politics and economics. For him, the world ran according to natural laws or second causes. When he was writing on economics, or as he called it, trade, he saw a self-governing system ruled by general laws. In matters of trade, he was a firm believer in the view that God had created the world with various goods in certain parts, so that trade would be desirable. However, in treating the more rapacious elements in trade, he seemed to allow for great freedom of action. Since he argued in his *Complete English Tradesman* that all trade was a form of theft, it is difficult to see how he would reconcile such a belief with a fully Providential Hand.

In fact, he apparently felt no particular need to align his religious views with what he perceived to be the laws governing trade. All serious writers on economics accepted Machiavelli's arguments about treating the world as it actually was not as it should be. When it came to writing about trade, he could speak of developments in farming and manufacturing that might take hundreds of years. While in his writings on religion, he sometimes wrote as if the End of Time was near, in his economic writings, he saw Britain gradually moving toward crops grown in gardens as being the most profitable. He not only lived with such paradoxes but seemed to enjoy them.

I was looking at the Samuel Richardson edition of *The Complete English Tradesman* of 1738. In the introduction, the editor complained with considerable sarcasm that Defoe seemed to be of two minds about Bernard Mandeville's arguments on society and that, in editing the work, he had to reconcile Defoe with himself. Defoe knew exactly what he thought about Mandeville -- that despite his seeming obtuseness to moral issues many of his economic ideas were worth serious consideration. Defoe loved nothing better than paradox and seeing matters from varied points of view. It was part of his seventeenth-century literary roots. By 1738, it seemed old fashioned and long-winded. Much the same pleasure in paradox may be discovered in his treatment of the supernatural. As mentioned earlier, most of the ghost stories he tells in his three major works on the occult are either out and out

fakes or doubtful, and he satirizes them as such. Did he indeed go to examine the poltergeist that was making such a racket in a woman's house? He says he was there, casting himself as a kind of Houdini, investigating strange appearances and showing them to be frauds. This one turned out to be a monkey that had somehow got hold of a mallet and was banging loudly.¹⁴ And he wrote of a hoax involving a strange light that went on and off in a deserted house, one in which it is at least possible that he participated.¹⁵ In *A System of Magick*, he is mainly intent on writing about similar hoaxes. His "Cunning Men" are certainly cunning in our sense of that word, but they are no more able to read the future than anyone else (Preface).

And Defoe did not believe in ghosts in the traditional sense. Spirits might assume the appearance of the dead -- good ones to help people, bad ones to harm them -- but he did not believe that the souls of the dead walked the earth. Thus, to his mind, the being who appears to Brutus to warn him of his coming demise in his *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* was not the ghost of Caesar, as Shakespeare would apparently have had it, but some kind of spirit.¹⁶ Defoe appears to have known Hamlet,¹⁷ but he left no comments on the appearance of Hamlet's father -- the ghost that continued to thrill audiences on the stage throughout the eighteenth century, Garrick's mechanical wig with its hair standing on end and all. This strikes me as a pity. Defoe had apparently come to terms with the stage by the time he wrote *The Commentator* in 1720.¹⁸ Doubtless he would have shared Hamlet's initial suspicions about whether it might have been an evil spirit. But Defoe was concerned with examining and sometimes debunking stories of ghosts who were supposed to have more than a fictional meaning such as the ghosts of tragedy. Still, as with his paradoxical contact with Milton as a poet and thinker over the years, it would have been a great thing to have viewed him dealing with this most famous of ghosts.

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NOTES

¹ One such "ghost story" appeared early in Defoe's career. In *The Vision*, a little known poem published in Edinburgh around 14 November 1706, Defoe imagined Lord Beilhaven, who had made a tearful speech against the Union of England and Scotland, as a sorcerer conjuring up imaginary ghosts:

And now the Exorcist in turn
Like a Ghost in a Circle arises,
Without any Tears he can Mourn
He is Extasies all and Surprises.

Although the context is satiric, that Defoe should have employed the image of the orator as sorcerer is perhaps indicative of his continuing interest in the subject. The pattern appears to involve fascination and doubt. In his *Review* of 29 March 1705, while admitting the biblical basis for the existence of spirits, he had his Scandal Club warn against a “Bewildered Imagination” that was capable of creating spirits “in the Head ... for the meer sake of its own Delusion” (*Defoe’s “Review”* 2.42-3).

- ² Encountering Defoe years after the problems of the political wars were over, Henry Baker simply thought of Defoe as a famous and successful author, a status to which he aspired. Baker was later to praise the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* in *The Universal Spectator*. For Baker’s view of Defoe, see Novak, 648–50. For Jonathan Swift’s comment on Defoe as “illiterate,” see Swift’s *Prose Works*, 3.23.
- ³ See Manuel Schonhorn (ed.), *Accounts of the Apparition of Mrs. Veal*.
- ⁴ For the Cambridge Platonists on spirits, see Ralph Cudworth’s *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 700–701, and Thomas Burnet’s *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, 1.452.
- ⁵ See Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism; or, Notes upon Each Chapter of Mr. Lock’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1702).
- ⁶ For example Hagar (Genesis 21:19) is shown the source of water she was unable to see until the angel of God revealed it to her.
- ⁷ See for example, John Locke, *Of Education*, 243–44. Almost a century later, Maria Edgeworth and her father, in their work on education, were making the same complaint about the influence of servants and their superstitions upon children.
- ⁸ The best account of these pamphlets is in Rodney Baine’s *Defoe and the Supernatural*, 109–28. Baine has a more serious take on Defoe’s toying with prophecy than I do.
- ⁹ References to Defoe’s *Review* are given by volume and page number.
- ¹⁰ See Swift, *Prose Works*, 2.142–92.
- ¹¹ Baker’s statement is factually true, since the first edition did appear in Newcastle, several months before Baker’s edition (Moore 81–82).
- ¹² All subsequent references to *The Second-Sighted Highlander* are from the 1715 edition.
- ¹³ It is significant that in his *Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Defoe dismissed the notion of floating islands in Loch Lomond as nonsense (2.839). Mount Aphlec may be Ben Ivlec near the lake.

¹⁴ Defoe told this story several times. See for example, *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 61–2, and *The Political History of the Devil*, 215 (note to 31–32:9).

¹⁵ See the speculations of F. Bastian in *Defoe's Early Life*, 2, 35–36.

¹⁶ The text of Shakespeare's play seems to support the idea that the vision is Brutus's "evil spirit," but the scene direction has "*Enter the Ghost of Caesar*"; see p. 719 of the facsimile edition of Shakespeare's *Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* published by Yale University Press in 1954. This facsimile of the first folio does not have full scene and line numbers, but modern editing usually has it as IV.iii.275–87.

¹⁷ See the remarks of the editors of *The Political History of the Devil*, 367. It seems to me that Defoe's poem has to be a kind of paraphrase of Hamlet's soliloquy.

¹⁸ See *The Commentator*, 11 January 1720.

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