Defoe and the Birth of the Imaginary

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ANY scholar who has read Defoe in the fifty-odd years since the publication of Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) must have had some difficulties with the presence in Defoe’s writings of supernatural beings, particularly apparitions from the invisible world.1 Watt, after all, told us that the distinguishing characteristic of Defoe’s fiction was his attachment to “philosophical realism,” to the “view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it” (12). The realism of the modern world, by which Watt refers to the philosophy of Descartes and Locke as formulated in mid-century by Thomas Reid, “begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses” (Watt 12). This empirical definition of reality privileges the particular over the universal, the sensible over the sentimental, and the actual over the ideal. In fact, Watt leaves ideas, sentiments, and spirits quite out of his definition of the novel, which he says is a form that is “largely referential” of the external world. The genre of the novel “works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration,” admitting into evidence only those “particularities” that would be admissible in a court of law (Watt 31–32). In reading Defoe’s fiction, then, we must look skeptically at such passages as the one in which Robinson Crusoe tells us that he was saved from stumbling into the presence of “fifteen or twenty Savages” by “secret Hints, or pressings of my Mind” to go “this Way, when Sense, [one’s] own Indination, and perhaps Business has called to go the other Way” (Defoe, *RC* 148). Crusoe admonishes his readers “not to slight such secret Intimations of Providence, let them come from what invisible Intelligence they will, that I shall not discuss, and perhaps cannot account for; but certainly they are a Proof of the Converse of Spirits, and the secret Communication between those embody’d, and those unembody’d”
Of course Crusoe does “account for” this converse of spirits at length in the third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, where he maintains the reality of the angelic world and affirms that he has visited it, in his imagination. If we accept Watt’s definition of the genre of the novel as the product of philosophical realism, we must discount the “secret Intimations” of volume one, the “angelic visions” of volume three, and important parts of most of Defoe’s other fictions.

Several scholars have offered readings of *Robinson Crusoe* that accommodate the reality of these secret intimations of an unseen Providence. G. A. Starr and J. Paul Hunter have shown that Defoe’s fictional method derives from such Puritan literary traditions as the guidebook, the spiritual biography, and the pilgrim allegory, all of which include supernatural elements. Rodney Baine has written at length of the uses Defoe makes of Christian angelology throughout his fiction, including angelic dreams, voices, and instances of second sight. Maximillian Novak has shown that Defoe’s three works on the supernatural, *The Political History of the Devil* (1726), *A System of Magick* (1726), and *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727) were part of his campaign against deism, Arianism, and atheism, all of which tended to elevate reason to the status of a “magical faculty” at the expense of belief in and reliance upon God (Novak 664). Coming as they do after the writing of Defoe’s remarkable string of fictions, these three works, along with “A Vision of the Angelic World” in the *Serious Reflections*, seem intended to theorize the fictions -- that is, to strengthen the claim that each of Defoe’s fictions makes to be a work of moral instruction, as well as mere amusement. Defoe’s theory of the reality of apparitions not only demonstrated that Christianity was mysterious, pace John Toland, but also emphasized the utility of fiction and imagination in cultivating the moral sensibility.

Fortunately, we now have splendid new editions of two of these books -- a meticulous text of *The Political History of the Devil*, edited by Irving N. Rothman and R. Michael Bowerman, and an equally admirable text of the *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, edited by Kit Kincade, both with extensive introductions, annotations, and textual notes. With these volumes we can decide for ourselves whether Defoe’s reliance on dreams, voices, and apparitions in his fictions was a mere literary device meant to appeal to a reading public that had not yet weaned itself from the superstitions of the past, or whether his use of the supernatural was part of an emerging theory on the origin, utility, and reality of moral sentiments.

Let us briefly review what Defoe does and does not say on a central issue in these books, the way in which unembodied spirits from the invisible world communicate with human beings. That such spirits exist our author takes to be a proven fact -- or at least, the contrary cannot be proven. These spirits are not the voice of God himself, who no longer communicates with man, though the Old Testament tells us he formerly did. Neither does the Son of God, nor any of the Archangels, visit mankind, the reason being that we have “the Preaching of the Gospel, and the
Revelation of God by a written Word,” which alleviates the need for “a ministration of Angels” (Defoe, HRA 21). The only Archangel who does interest himself in human affairs is the Devil, who, though capable of changing his shape, can be detected through his works, because the Devil never advises us to take a course that leads to goodness (Defoe, HRA 152–53). The ghosts of men and women who have died can not walk among us, because once on the other side they can not return, nor can they re-assume their bodies or even the appearance of embodiment (Defoe, HRA 94). The only apparitions we might encounter, other than the Devil, are a “middle Class of Spirit[s], neither Angelick-Heavenly, or Angelick-Infernal” who inhabit “the invisible Spaces, and [are] allow’d to act and appear here, under express and greatly strain’d Limitations” (Defoe, HRA 37). These middle-class spirits are not bodies,

neither had they been ever embodied; but such as they are, they have a Power of conversing among us, and particularly with Spirits embodied, and can by Dreams, Impulses and strong Aversions, move our Thoughts, and give Hope, raise Doubts, sink our Souls to-day, elevate them to-morrow, and many ways operate upon our Passions and Affections; may give Intimations of Good or Evil; but cannot, thro’ some unknown Restraint upon their Power, go any farther, speak any plainer, or give the least Assistance to us, no, not be Council or Direction to guide us or tell us how to act for our own Preservation. (Defoe, HRA 31)

It seems significant that these unembodied spirits should communicate with us by acting upon our passions and affections, rather than by reminding us of some moral precept or counseling a course of action for avoiding some evil that may befall us. The spirits can warn us of an approaching danger but not its specific nature; they may counsel us to act in a certain way but not tell us why it is in our interest to do so. It is left to us to will ourselves to act, or not act, in accord with our love of the good and our abhorrence of evil. It is this element of willing the good, rather than merely following directions, that makes Defoe’s system a moral one. Further, by acting upon the passions and affections rather than reason, which as Defoe observes failed Eve in the Garden of Eden and has been a weak guide for mankind ever since (Novak 664, paraphrasing A System of Magick), Providence acts upon our sense of right and wrong rather than our knowledge of it. In this respect, Defoe’s moral system shares some elements with the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, who would make a similar argument a year or two later in his Essay Upon the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense (1728). Hutcheson did not claim that a middle class of spirits could converse with us, but he did assert that we are endowed with an internal moral sense which, unless overridden by the external senses, instructs our passions and affections to love and perform good actions, and to despise evil.

To show how fiction and the imagination might contribute to the cultivation of a
moral sensibility, we will look closely at one of the many stories that are embedded in
the *Essay Upon the History and Reality of Apparitions*. It seems that a certain young
lady has been “over-persuaded” by her lover’s “importunities for a criminal
Conversation,” and she reluctantly agrees to meet the young gentleman at a
farmhouse belonging to one of his father’s tenants. As she approaches the house,
coming over the fields, she sends her maid back to town on a spurious errand. Her
maid offers to stay with her until they reach the house, but the lady says that she sees
the Minister of the town approaching them on the path, “so I shall have his Company;
you may go back, Mary, I shall be safe enough” (Defoe, *HRA* 99). The Maid then
sees the Minister too, and so returns the way they came.

The Minister greets the lady and asks her how she came to be in the field
alone. As they talk, it becomes clear that the Minister knows where she is going and
whom she is meeting there. The lady is “touch’d with Shame and Indignation;
supposing the young Gentleman had boasted of her Favours before he had receiv’d
them, and had betray’d her,” but she tries to conceal her embarrassment. The
Minister, however, rebukes her strongly:

Come, come, young Lady, says he, you can’t conceal your wicked Purposes; you have
made Mr. —— an Appointment; he prevail’d on you last Night, and you have now
deck’d yourself up with your Ornaments to meet him, and prostitute your Virtue, and
your Honour, and your Conscience, all to his corrupt vicious Appetite; and I know it,
you may see that I do; my Advice to you is to go back and break your wicked Promise,
and repent that you have made it. I shall give him the same Advice presently. (Defoe,
*HRA* 100)

In shame and confusion, the lady returns home, where she “gave vent to her Passions
with the utmost Rage” (Defoe, *HRA* 100).

The next morning, the would-be lovers exchange a series of angry letters, in
which the young gentleman complains of having waited for her for five hours, and she
accuses him of drawing her into a “sinful, shameful Compliance with him, and then
exposing her, and triumphing over her Weakness” (Defoe, *HRA* 101). She tells him
that the Minister knew of her errand, which he could only have learned from the
young gentleman himself, though the gentleman knows that he never spoke with the
Minister or even saw him. When the gentleman upbraids the Minister several days
later with having deprived him of the lady’s company, the Minister denies having met
the lady in the fields and says, moreover, that he was in London for the entire month.
It would seem that either the lady is lying about having seen the Minister, the
gentleman is lying about not having informed the Minister about the meeting, or the
Minister is lying about not having been in town at all that day.

In a dramatic and passionate scene, the lady and the gentleman confront each
other about the contradictions in their stories. One word leads to another until the lady
“colour’d, and raising her Voice,” told him that “he show’d her again that he was no Gentleman; that if he gave her the Lie again she would spit in his Face; and that if he would furnish her with a Sword, she would do her self justice, and give him Satisfaction as fairly as if she was a Man; and that for his giving her the Lie, she threw it back in his Face, he might make the best of it” (Defoe, *HRA* 106). To settle the argument, the lady calls her maid, who testifies that she saw the Minister coming toward them, and that he spoke to her, saying “How d’ye do Mrs. Mary?” and touched his hat (Defoe, *HRA* 110). The alert reader will see, however, that instead of resolving the issue the maid’s testimony complicates it further, because in the original relation the maid returned to town before the Minister came up to them and never spoke to him. Either the maid is also lying, all of these persons are deceived by their senses, or there is some great mystery at work here.

The mystery seems solved several days later, when the lady meets the Minister again, coming across a field. The Minister reminds her of their former discourse, upon which she protests, “Sir, I have been very ill us’d upon that Day’s Work,” to which the Minister replies:

> I know it, says he, I know it, repeating the Words: But your innocence shall be cleared up, I will do it my self; do you be thankful that you escap’d the Snare: And so, giving her no time to answer, he pass’d by her without taking any farewell: which being a little Particular, made her turn her Head to look at him: But tho’ it was in the middle of the Field, which was too large for him to be out of it if he had flown as swift as a Pidgeon, (for it was not above a Moment, not a Second of Time) he was gone, and she saw nothing. (Defoe, *HRA* 111)

The lady now understands the Minister to have been an apparition, and a “good Angel” rather than the Devil, because the Devil would have encouraged her to keep the appointment with her lover instead of turning back. When she explains the mystery to her young gentleman, they are reconciled, and he has a much higher notion of her virtue than he previously did.

The narrator of the story insists that the apparition was a “real” one and that it was a “good Spirit,” but he also concedes that he cannot vouch for “all of the Particulars, at least not sufficiently,” because “the particular Relation does not come within the verge of my own Knowledge” (Defoe, *HRA* 113–14, 112). If, however, “the Story be as I have receiv’d it and now handed it down, it seems a merciful Disposition of Providence in Favour of the Gentleman, as well as the Lady; and be it a Parable or a History, the Moral is the same, and the Improvement of it the same too: They that are running the same Course of Folly would have Reason to be very thankful if they were sure to meet with the same kind of Disappointment, and would never say it was the Devil that told it them” (Defoe, *HRA* 113). In other words, the veracity of the story and the reality of the apparition are less important than the moral effect of the
story on its readers. If the lady and the gentleman should be improved in their internal moral sensibilities by the belief that they had been visited by an apparition, and if the reader should take away from the story the belief that such apparitions are Providential, then what does it matter, the narrator seems to say, whether the good Angel was sent directly from God or was the product of her own imagination, an innate affection for the Good, manifested in a form that was visible to the lady but to no one else?

It may be objected that the lady’s maid in the story said that she saw the Minister as well, so therefore he must have been “real” in some objective sense. We have already seen that her testimony is suspect, because she is first said to have turned back toward town when her Mistress saw the Minister coming toward them across the field, and then she later says that the Minister spoke to her. Of course we know that the maids in Defoe’s stories, like Roxana’s Amy in The Fortunate Mistress, see and say exactly what they think their mistresses want them to see and say. But all such questions of the story’s “truth-value” are swept away by the narrator’s admission that he has the story only at second hand and cannot vouch for the particulars, and also by his equivocation, “be it a Parable or a History, the Moral is the same, and the Improvement of it the same too” (Defoe, HRA 113). What matters is the sentiment, not the realism of the story. The sentiment is the residual effect of the story on the passions and affections, the attachment to virtue that proceeds from the observation of a good example.2 For Defoe, as for later writers in the sentimental tradition, the story succeeds if it improves the reader’s internal moral sensibility, not if it adheres to a definition of reality based on the evidence of the external senses.

Defoe was fully aware of the dangers of the imagination, which he often associated with “hypochondriacal vapours.” When Robinson Crusoe reflects in his third volume on the frightful apprehensions he experienced on his island, he notes that “all these things lasted but a short while, and the vapours that were raised at first were not to be so easily laid; for in a word, it was not mere imagination, but it was the imagination raised up to disease” (Defoe, RC iii. 256–57). He is also skeptical of visions formed in the imagination, because, as he says in a dutiful bow to Lockean empiricism, “We can form no idea of anything that we know not and have not seen but in the form of something that we have seen” (Defoe, RC iii. 288). Still, he admits that his famous voyage through “the vast No-where of unbounded Space” (Defoe, HRA 26), in which he visited the planets inhabited by invisible spirits, was a flight of the imagination:

Whether my imagination is more addicted to realising the things I talk of, as if they were in view, I know not, or whether by the power of the converse of spirits I speak of I was at that time enabled to entertain clearer ideas of the invisible world, I really cannot tell, but I certainly made a journey to all those supposed habitable bodies in my imagination, and I know not but it may be very useful to tell you what I met with in my
Crusoe then launches into a discourse upon the workings of the imagination, too long to recount here, but which concludes in a ringing endorsement of the imaginary faculty:

I say, the soul of man is capable to act strangely upon the invisibles in Nature, and upon futurity, realising everything to itself in such a lively manner, that what it thus thinks of it really sees, speaks to, hears, converses with, &c., as lively as if the substance was really before his face; and this is what I mean by those that dream waking, by visions, trances, or what you please to call them, for it is not necessary to this part that the man should be asleep. (Defoe, RC iii. 269–70)

In short, Locke notwithstanding, the soul converses directly with the nonmaterial world through the imagination, and this conversation is real. What made Defoe a great maker of fictions was not only his compilation of the particulars of experience, but also the major contribution he made to the birth of the imaginary.

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NOTES

1 The epistemological problems posed by apparition narratives are touched on by Michael McKeon in The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740, 83–87, and discussed (with regard to some nineteenth-century novels) by Srdjan Smajić in “Supernatural Realism,” 1–22.

2 On the effect of example, see Francis Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, 74–75.

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