Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe

An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions (1727)

Edited by
G. A. Starr

ROUTLEDGE

THE PICKERING MASTERS

THE WORKS OF DANIEL DEFOE

General Editors:

W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank

SATIRE, FANTASY AND WRITINGS ON THE SUPERNATURAL BY DANIEL DEFOE

Volume 1: *The True-Born Englishman and other Poems*, ed. W. R. Owens
Volume 2: *Jure Divino*, ed. P. N. Furbank
Volume 3: *The Consolidator*, *Memoirs of Count Tariff*, and *The Quarrel of the School-Boys at Athens*, ed. Geoffrey Sill
Volume 4: *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsr. Mesnager*, *Secret Memoirs of a Treasonable Conference at S— House*, and *The Old Whig and Modern Whig Revived*, ed. P. N. Furbank
Volume 5: *The Conduct of Christians made the Sport of Infidels* and *A Continuation of Letters written by a Turkish Spy at Paris*, ed. David Blewett
Volume 6: *The Political History of the Devil*, ed. John Mullan
Volume 7: *A System of Magick*, ed. Peter Elmer
Volume 8: *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, ed. G. A. Starr

SATIRE, FANTASY AND WRITINGS ON THE SUPERNATURAL BY DANIEL DEFOE

General Editors: W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank

Volume 8:

AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORY AND REALITY OF APPARITIONS (1727)

Edited by
G. A. Starr

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2005 by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledgeis an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Defoe, Daniel, 1661?–1731
Satire, fantasy and writings on the supernatural
Vols. 5–8. – (The works of Daniel Defoe) (The Pickering masters)
I. Title II. Owens, W. R. III. Furbank, Philip Nicholas IV. Blewett, David
828.5'09

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
A catalogue record for this title is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN-13: 978-1-85196-733-9 (set)

Typeset by P&C

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dina Stein, Joanna Picciotto, Julia Bader, Sharon Kim Goetz, Steve Justice, Ian Jackson, David Blewett and the General Editors for helpful suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

'If you believe more than I do, you're a fanatic; if you believe less than I do, you're an atheist'. Defoe might turn over in his grave at being associated with such sentiments, or at all events with such a bald and complacent expression of them; yet this view of the alternatives to his own position on religious questions characterises much of *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*. It has traditionally been discussed with *A System of Magick* and *The Political History of the Devil* as forming a trio of related works on the occult or supernatural. But they might justly be considered along with *A New Family Instructor* as forming a quartet that explores deviations from, and threats to, sound belief. In all of them history, satire, drama and critical interpretation are mixed in varying proportions, with history and satire preponderant in *A System of Magick* and *The Political History of the Devil*, dramatic narrative and issues of belief more prominent in *A New Family Instructor* and *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*. Our generic labels for these books are somewhat problematic, however. When we call them 'satirical', we use a term that coincides with Defoe's own habits of mind, and conveys accurately one of his major intentions. But when we group them under the rubric 'occult', as many modern commentators do, we are importing a category that is largely alien to him, and to his sense of what these books are about. One of Defoe's objectives is to suggest that the 'natural' and the 'supernatural', the 'visible world' and the 'invisible world', are not separate and opposed but connected and permeable, both as categories of thought and parts of a larger reality. From his point of view, to describe these works as being about the occult would marginalise and trivialise them; it would suggest a complicity in superstition, which is one of the main targets of his satire.

In any case, all four books were published within sixteen months, two by T. Warner (*The Political History of the Devil* (May 1726) and *A New Family Instructor* (September 1727)), two by J. Roberts (*A System of Magick*

(December 1726) and *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (March 1727)). As the cross-references in my Explanatory Notes indicate, there is considerable overlapping between them. These include general preoccupations and themes; specific anecdotes, personages and citations from Scripture and other sources; and numerous verbal repetitions.[1] Considered as a group, these works suggest that believing too little is as bad as believing too much; Defoe saw the two extremes as equivalent, and deplored both.

The pages that follow will emphasise continuities between the *History and Reality of Apparitions* and Defoe's other writings; the importance of his rhetoric of moderation, exemplified most fully in his treatment of the 'new Philosophy' on the one hand, and Roman Catholicism on the other; the linkages he sought to develop between 'history' and 'reality' through stories and his commentary on them; and other salient features of his technique and style. Without being very systematic, Defoe's views on the supernatural are worked out with a good deal of internal coherence, and remain consistent over time. Along with a number of orthodox Protestant features (such as his rejection of ghost-belief), his opinions include some that are not as middle-of-the-road as he tries to make them seem. Indeed, one of the oddities of this book is the fading away, as it were, of apparitions from its argumentative centre. Its ultimate object is a vindication of the reality not of apparitions themselves, but of the soul and a world of spirit, which the existence of (similarly immaterial) apparitions serves to bolster. If Defoe had thought the apparition question would hurt the case for the soul rather than helping it, he probably would have eschewed it altogether: he does, after all, avoid a related subject long invoked in support of the doctrine of the soul but now discredited, namely witchcraft. At the same time, he believes that things experienced in sleep afford stronger evidence for the existence of the soul than even the best-attested waking apparitions. This conviction seems to have been based on his sense of the close analogy between the state of consciousness during sleep and the nature of the soul. That the mind continues functioning when the body is at rest, and that dreams yield objects and events seemingly independent of bodily experience, evidently intrigues him, and furnishes a kind of corroboration for

[1] Another work of similar length published by T. Warner during this same 16-month period – *Conjugal Lewdness* (January 1727) – somewhat resembles these others in its didactic-satiric intent. But its focus on moral problems is largely independent of spiritual concerns, whereas questions of behaviour and questions of belief tend to be connected in the other four. Nor does *Conjugal Lewdness* contain local echoes of the sort that link the other four books so closely with one another – perhaps owing to the fact (if it is a fact) that much of it was written decades earlier, as Defoe claims in its preface.

there being such a thing as a soul. Defoe thinks the most authentic and valuable communication with the 'invisible world' is not visual, but takes the form of voices or inaudible hints and impulses during sleep or day-dreaming. To him these events offer compelling grounds for believing that spirits exist, that they are agents of providence, and that they take an active and benevolent interest in human welfare.

I began by suggesting that Defoe tries to characterise himself as both pious and moderate. My objective is not biographical; to assess the genuineness and define the exact shade of the religiosity of the historical Daniel Defoe is beyond the scope of this introduction. My concern is rather with the self-presentation that is fundamental to this book: Defoe's rhetoric depends on positioning himself midway between fanaticism and atheism. How he distances himself from the latter can be illustrated by his critique of the 'new Philosophy'.[2] A declining belief in magic, and in the supernatural more generally, is often linked to the spread and the growing prestige of scientific thinking, and this was certainly a contributing factor. Defoe's own training at Charles Morton's Dissenting Academy in Newington Green seems to have emphasised science, living languages and practical subjects rather than the classics, and thus gave rise to interests and sympathies that were distinctly 'modern' in the sense that Swift despised. But in this book Defoe treats science as an enemy rather than an ally; he associates it with a materialism that he sees as tantamount to atheism. The object of his criticism, however, is not the mindless minutiae of Royal Society observation and experimentation, of the sort ridiculed in Book 3 of *Gulliver's Travels*, but rather a set of cosmological ideas based on a century-old astronomy. Defoe's satire is directed against what Huygens and Fontenelle had made of Copernicus and Galileo, not against more recent empirical methods or findings. The problem for him is not that the new natural philosophy is too immersed in brute fact, but the reverse. Instead of acknowledging any empirical or experimental basis for these new ideas, he treats them as utterly speculative, and ridicules them for being as fanciful as the inherited superstitions they seek to supplant. The 'new Philosophy' and religious enthusiasm are therefore not starkly opposed alternatives: in Defoe's hands, they are made to seem virtually identical illusions, equally extreme and equally remote from his own moderate position, which is pious and level-headed, not freethinking or fanatical.

The most vigorous instance of this strategy is Defoe's satire on the notion of the habitability of other planets, which involves a bold turning of

[2] *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, below, pp. 62–3. Page references for future quotations are given in parentheses in the text.

the tables on his antagonists. Reversing positions with the 'new Philosophers', he holds up as visionary their notion that life is possible on Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter or Saturn. Generalising from this, he treats the 'new Philosophy' in its entirety as the product of unbridled fantasy rather than sober cogitation or actual observation, and thus as vulnerable to the same objections lodged against apparitions in the name of empirical, scientific thinking. The validity of the hypothesis that other planets are habitable has no bearing whatever, of course, on the validity of contentions regarding the reality of apparitions; there is no logical or cosmological link between them. Yet there is a meaningful rhetorical connection: strained as the analogy may seem to us, Defoe sets them up as rival narratives, each positing the existence of something not readily amenable to the kind of testing by everyday sense experience that we bring to most matters. We should not have to choose between the two, as if they were alternative world-pictures, one but not both of which must be sound; yet this is what Defoe's rhetoric pushes us to do. Planet dwellers have weaker claims to reality than apparitions; more importantly, the scientific mentality that hatched the notion of planet dwelling has weaker claims to the reader's respect and trust than his own judicious habits of mind.

Over against the groundless 'whimsies' of religious as well as scientific enthusiasts, Defoe sets a carefully cultivated tone of restraint and deliberateness. For the most part, purveyors of stories about the invisible world are portrayed as overwrought, deluded, or simple-minded, while fabricators of hypotheses about the plurality of worlds are derided as devious, cynical freethinkers. In contrast, Defoe poses as someone neither fooled easily himself, nor having any motive to impose upon his reader. An air of upright, disinterested common sense, steering a moderate course between excesses that can be labelled 'superstitious' and 'scientific', is reminiscent of the posture of Defoe's narrator in *A Journal of the Plague Year*. H. F. the saddler is similarly intent on occupying a middle ground, in his interpretation of the origin and transmission of the plague, between the extremes of religious zealots who attribute everything to the punitive hand of an angry God, and of atheistical physicians who explain everything mechanistically in terms of miasma or contagion.

As for the subject matter of the 'new Philosophy', cosmology had fascinated Defoe for decades, and system building such as Thomas Burnet's[3] had long engaged his imagination. Yet his own claims to universal vision are usually ironic: examples are his elevated perspective on

[3] See Thomas Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681), of which there were various editions as *Theory of the Earth* (1684f.)

mundane enormities in *The Consolidator: or, Memoirs of Sundry Transactions from the World in the Moon* (1705), his guying of *Paradise Lost* in *Political History of the Devil* (1726), and his deflation of the 'new Philosophy' in the present book. In each case he uses a given view of the solar system for his own satirical purposes, not because there is some alternative scheme that he regards as more valid scientifically, and wants to put in its place. He recognises in works like *The Storm* (1704) that the knowledge of the physical universe afforded by Scripture is somewhat circumscribed, and that science may one day be able to explain much that is now baffling. He approves of patient efforts to read farther in the book of nature, but not of trying to amplify the book of God through mere speculation, as Milton and the 'new Philosophers' both presume to do. When he does venture in this direction himself, most notably in the 'Vision of the Angelick World' appended to Crusoe's *Serious Reflections* (1720), he makes clear that it is a flight of fancy, not an exercise in system building; whenever he approaches the limits of revealed truth, he ostentatiously backs away. To put it another way, Defoe could have written a book in which the 'invisible world' was explored at length as an alternative to our familiar, visible world. He knew utopian and anti-utopian literature, and had tried his hand at it, with interesting but uneven results, two decades earlier in *The Consolidator*. If he does not give us a sustained anatomy of that other world here, it is because he was unwilling to soar off imaginatively in this fashion. That possibility is adumbrated in 'A Vision of the Angelick World', which Defoe could have developed into a book-length work, even though he in fact abandons the dream device rather quickly. Given the objectives of the present book, Defoe was surely wise to reject the formal precedents represented by his *Consolidator* or his 'Vision': that is, of the celestial voyage or utopia on the one hand, or of the celestial vision or dream on the other. Whatever scope they might afford for his ingenuity or irony, these traditional genres would jeopardise his attempts to establish the *History* or the *Reality* of apparitions; their association with allegory and artifice would be at odds with his allegiance to the real and the genuine, proclaimed on the very title page.

True, it is not easy to tell whether the title page expresses the author's intentions or those of his publisher-bookseller. But even if this title was not entirely Defoe's doing, its labelling or packaging strategy is worth considering. It pairs the *Reality* of apparitions with their *History* as primary concerns; somewhat different expectations would have been created by following the model of the 1726 book on Satan and calling this the *Political History* – or simply the *History* – of apparitions. Although the book is genuinely historical in some ways, its arrangement is not chronological. Various scriptural apparitions are touched upon in the first chapter, but

the views of ancient Greeks and Romans are surveyed only in the ninth chapter, and the sequence of more modern cases has nothing to do with when they occurred; they are distributed among fifteen topically organised chapters, which vary in length from three to more than sixty pages. Calling the work *An Essay* introduces a further generic element: it promises something more analytical than a 'mere' *History*, but also something less systematic or exhaustive than a formal *Treatise*.[4]

Why should Roman Catholicism have become a major object of Defoe's satire, as it does in the latter part of this book? He had long regarded it as both sinister and absurd. Already in *Religious Courtship* (1722), marrying someone of a different religion is almost as dangerous as marrying a person with no religion at all; the machinations of a kind but determined husband to Romanise his Protestant wife are used to bring out the insidiousness of the Popish threat. Similarly *A New Family Instructor* (1727), despite its title, is not really a sequel to *The Family Instructor* – a conduct manual about the relative duties of parents and children, masters and servants – so much as a sustained exercise in Rome-bashing. It does employ the dialogue method, and creates some drama through the efforts of an eldest son, converted to Popery on the Grand Tour, to pervert the faith of his siblings. But the bulk of the book consists of the father's refutations of the arguments that the son and his priestly prompters advance on behalf of Roman Catholicism.

In criticising Catholicism, then, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* is not alone among Defoe's later works. The '*Absurdities* of Popery' are given greatest prominence in *A New Family Instructor*; in that book its danger looms larger, and is treated more dramatically, than others that would appear to have been more pressing in the late 1720s.[5] Defoe clearly had Catholicism on his mind at this time, yet the peril to Protestantism from the Pretender and Popery, which he had reason to fear throughout the reigns of William and Anne, had receded with the Hanoverian succession and the defeat of the Jacobite rising in 1715. Within Defoe's lifetime the threat had been greatest even earlier, toward the end of James II's

[4] This term was used, for example, in the same year as the present work, as part of the title of Defoe's *Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed*, which was a reissue of *Conjugal Lewdness: or, Matrimonial Whoredom* (1726).

[5] The book is divided into two parts: the first, containing a father's efforts to confirm his children 'in the Protestant Religion, against the *Absurdities* of Popery', occupies 246 pages; the second occupies 137 pages, and contains 'INSTRUCTIONS against the Three Grand Errors of the Times; Viz. 1. Asserting the *Divine Authority* of the Scripture; against the Deists. 2. Proofs, that the Messias is already come, *&c.* against the Atheists and Jews. 3. Asserting, the Divinity of JESUS CHRIST … against our Modern Hereticks'.

reign; both here and in *A New Family Instructor*, Defoe borrows extensively from a book printed 'during the Time of the late Popish Controversies … a little before the Revolution', Henry Wharton's *The Enthusiasm of the Church of Rome Demonstrated in some Observations upon the life of Ignatius Loyola* (1688).[6]

By 1727, Defoe cannot have supposed that the faith of English Protestants was as threatened by Catholicism as by freethinking, which ranged from cautious Deism through Arianism and Socinianism – 'our MODERN HERETICKS' – to outright (if seldom openly admitted) atheism. One explanation for the prominence he gives to the subject is that legends about Catholic saints, from St Francis through Loyola, were full of 'Sham Apparitions' offering opportunities for 'polemic satire', as Rodney M. Baine notes.[7] A better explanation may be that Defoe *needs* representatives of superstition – needs believers in apparitions that he can characterise as fanciful or fraudulent – in order to locate his own judicious position midway between atheism and fanaticism. He has to make his own standpoint as broad as possible: ideally, one that is shared by all the reformed churches or all English Protestants. What he is determined to avoid is a posture that can be identified as distinctively Dissenting, charged with enthusiasm, and

In an interesting discussion of these late works, Maximillian E. Novak argues that Defoe 'was responding mainly to a group of writers on religious subjects who, starting with John Toland's *Nazarenus* in 1718 and ending with Anthony Collins's *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered*, in 1727, raised questions about the origins of Christianity and the doctrines associated with the teachings of Christ': see 'Defoe, the Occult, and the Deist Offensive during the Reign of George I' in J. A. Leo Lemay (ed.), *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge* (Newark, Delaware, 1987), p. 94. To Defoe, Deism was indeed a provocation – one among various post-Hobbesian movements that had contributed, over many decades, to the spread of atheism. But in *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* he does not skirmish with Toland, Collins or other Deists any more than with the advocates of materialism or mortalism, whose denial of the soul or unorthodox views about the soul are of concern to him. The catalogue of those he disagreed with would be a long one, including many non-Deists, but it is their collective tendency toward atheism, rather than their specific aberrations, that he criticises. The topicality of *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* therefore seems to me broader, both chronologically and thematically, than Novak suggests.

[6] Wharton's was part of a large outpouring of anti-Catholic polemic at the time, the scope of which can be gauged readily from the *Catalogue of the Mendham Collection: being a Selection of Books and Pamphlets from the Library of the late Rev. Joseph Mendham* (1871), which was particularly strong on that subject.

[7] Rodney M. Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* (Athens, Georgia, 1968), p. 82. Baine's useful monograph incorporates material from two earlier articles (see Explanatory Notes, note 27, below, p. 315), and is the amplest discussion to date of this aspect of Defoe's thought and writing.

dismissed. He must therefore distance his apparition beliefs from narrow sectarianism; he quotes from and discusses Anglican authorities such as Jeremy Taylor, Joseph Glanvill and John Aubrey, and makes 'the late Reverend Dr. *Scot*' the central figure in one of his stories, but avoids mentioning Dissenters who collected and endorsed apparition narratives, such as Richard Baxter and Cotton Mather. For Defoe's purposes, then, Roman Catholic tales of apparitions are (pardon the expression) a godsend, and the more fantastic the better. They bear out his substantive contention that many supposed apparitions have been fraudulently staged to support priestly power, and that their acceptance as true has owed less to clever contrivance than to popular credulousness. More importantly, they bolster his pretensions to be the spokesman for a no-nonsense Protestant religiosity, in which genuine faith is compatible with sardonic disdain for Popish hocus-pocus, its perpetrators and its believers.

In the closing chapters of the book, the incredible apparition accounts that crowd Catholic saints' lives are associated with the shams and delusions of paganism: whether they date from remote or recent times, and originate in Europe or farther afield, Defoe assigns responsibility for them to clerical chicanery, almost as sweepingly as freethinkers of the day were doing. Yet by focusing on the enormities of continental Catholicism, he can forestall any imputation of holding, with the freethinkers, that religion is nothing but priestcraft, everywhere and always. We hear about the politics of the Jesuits, and the rivalry between Franciscans and Dominicans, but not about sectarian clashes in England; about the devils of Loudon, but not about trials at Salem. There is no question that Defoe strongly disapproves of the Roman Catholic clergy, who have 'impos'd upon the World' (p. 285) with their 'cheats', 'bites', 'shams' and other 'vile Practices'. But if they had not existed, he would have had to invent them, because his enterprise requires that there be fanatics to one side of him, and also that they be as different as possible from himself and his fellow Dissenters, who were often stigmatised with this very label.

The supernatural is important to Defoe largely because of the support it lends to fundamental religious doctrines. For him, key principles of faith – that God exists, that the soul exists and is immortal, and that the two are linked through constant providential concern with human welfare – depend ultimately on revelation, as contained in Scripture. But they receive valuable confirmation in the present from the fact (as Defoe and other believers saw it) of ongoing communication between mankind and the Invisible World. Among the modes of such communication that had been put forward at various points between antiquity and his own day, one

stood out in Defoe's mind as possessing greater certainty and importance than any of the others: namely, that 'Spirits in the Invisible World' have 'a Power of conversing among us' by means of 'Dreams, Impulses and Strong Aversions'.[8] In this process, the visual element is often absent, and is not crucial; these messages seldom have any visible source. Nor is sound any more essential than sight. Although Defoe entitles an important essay '*Of listning to the Voice of* PROVIDENCE', both *listning* and *Voice* prove to be largely figurative, because he holds that this sort of communication can occur without being audible: 'For Spirits without the helps of Voice Converse', as he had put it in *The True-Born Englishman*.[9] A generalised Providence is sometimes represented as the source of these messages; in post-Apostolic times they do not come directly from God or major angels, but tend to be sent by lesser, subaltern 'spirits'. As to apparitions as a source of such communications, we might expect Defoe to favour this possibility, and he does not rule it out. Yet of the many reports of such occurrences that he recounts and analyses in this book, most turn out to be from people who were (as we say) seeing things: that is, not really seeing them at all, but imagining them.

Defoe does not regard this problem – that one or another supposed sighting of an apparition was the product of an overwrought imagination – as grounds for simply dismissing the episode as pathological, fraudulent, or meaningless. But such a critique, shifting the locus of an experience from a perception of the external world to a creation or projection of the mind itself, does affect the status of an apparition: in the ordinary sense of the word its 'reality' depends on its existing not only in the mind but outside it. Apparitions, Defoe believes, *can* present themselves from without, although they seldom do so now, and most alleged appearances, whether ancient or modern, cannot hold up to critical scrutiny. Yet he is prepared to draw a distinction in favour of hints, impulses, and so on that most of us would regard as arbitrary: even though they tend to occur (as do most apparition sightings) when one is dreaming or daydreaming, he is unwilling to locate them wholly within the mind of the subject. He is convinced that they originate outside us, and are impressed upon us, not generated within us.

[8] See pp. 67, 68 below; in 'A Vision of the Angelick World', Crusoe declares that the 'Converse of Spirits' is 'silent, emblematick, and done by Hints, Dreams, and Impulses'; elsewhere he expands the contacts to include 'Dreams, Voices, Noises, Impulses, Hints, Apprehensions, Involuntary Sadness, *&c.*' (*Serious Reflections*, pp. 43, 15).

[9] See Explanatory Notes, notes 15 and 18, below, pp. 313, 314.

About both kinds of communication (apparitions and promptings) Defoe is careful to avoid peremptoriness. By proclaiming himself equidistant from enthusiasm and unbelief, he can be ironic, with seeming impartiality, toward fanatics and atheists alike. By poking fun at superstitious folly he establishes his own probity, an important element in shielding his cherished belief in spirit communication from the charge of foolish superstition. Having cultivated an air of judicious tentativeness about matters that are unsettled, he can be all the more emphatic about other subjects – to our way of thinking equally questionable – which seem to him more certain. Chief among these on the positive side is the existence of spirits and their beneficent promptings, for which he finds ample confirmation in his own personal experience; chief among them on the negative side is the existence of ghosts.

Among Defoe's supernatural beliefs there is thus an unstated ontological gradation. After the existence of God, he seems most certain of the existence and immortality of the human soul, and of an invisible world between God and man. This is inhabited by angelic or quasi-angelic spirits, both good and bad, the latter consisting of Satan and his minions, the former of equally numerous angels and their subordinates, who execute providence's benign oversight of mankind by communicating to them monitory or hortatory impulses. The actual scope and power of either kind of spirit may be unknowable, but Defoe has no doubt that both exist, and are capable of influencing (but not controlling) human thoughts and actions. Lower on this hierarchy, not in dignity but in Defoe's certainty about their existence, come apparitions. If they exist, he believes, they are spirits who have become visible, but their status and mission are no different from those of spirits generally.[10]

To modern readers ghosts and apparitions may seem synonymous, but to Defoe the distinction between them was very important, and in the *His-*

[10] Defoe's attitude toward miracles is connected with his thinking about the history and reality of apparitions. For him the Bible establishes that miracles *have* existed, and therefore that they *can* exist, but not that they *do* exist. If miracles did happen, they could still happen, but in fact they have stopped happening: he thinks of them as real, but no longer actual. He does not explicitly assign apparitions the same status. They are as *outré*, but not as *passé*, and the modern accounts that he presents without explanation imply that apparitions are more than mere possibilities. Yet his commentary on many other stories tends to relegate them to the once-upon-a-time realm of miracles: even if they are as capable of existing as ever, they have become highly improbable. (Throughout this paragraph, 'witches' could be substituted for 'miracles' without greatly distorting Defoe's views.)

An excellent account of 'Witches, Apparitions and Revelations' is the sixth chapter of John Redwood's *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660–1750* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 134–54.

tory and Reality of Apparitions he devotes almost as much attention to attacking the belief in ghosts as to defending the possibility of apparitions. Different kinds of angelic or quasi-angelic spiritual entities can assume visible form temporarily, Defoe believes, for the purpose of delivering messages to human beings; thus they become apparitions on special, providentially appointed missions. Ghosts (as most people then and now use the term) are exclusively the souls of the deceased, either on return visits from heaven or hell, or lingering on earth while still in transit, as it were, to their long-term destinations. This is their nature and situation according to those who believe in them, which Defoe emphatically does not. To suppose that the 'walking disturbed Souls of Men lately embodied and departed' could reappear is 'a Notion empty and not to be defended; incongruous, and inconsistent either with Scripture, the Christian Religion, or Reason, and founded only in the bewildred Imaginations and Dreams of ignorant People' (p. 94). 'The dismiss'd, departed, unembodied Spirits, which we call Souls of Men, whether happy or miserable, can by no means appear among us; all Apparition of that Kind is fictitious and imaginary' (p. 129). Those who 'fall into all the absurdities of Souls remaining in a wandring, unappointed, unsettled state after Life', Defoe asserts, 'must in many things contradict the Scripture, and the receiv'd Opinions of all the reform'd Churches, and almost of all good Men even in all Ages' (p. 108). Judgements identical in substance, if not always quite so emphatic in tone, are to be found throughout his writings of the previous quarter century.[11] About the possibility of genuine apparitions, his remarks over the years had been more qualified and tentative, as indeed they are within the *History and Reality of Apparitions* itself. But his comments on the doctrine of 'silent Converse' with spirits had been uniformly supportive, not only defending the orthodoxy of the principle, as he does with apparitions, but also regularly proffering his own experiences to substantiate and confirm it.[12]

[11] A number of relevant quotations are assembled in my article, 'Why Defoe Probably Did Not Write *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 15 (2003), pp. 421–50, where the consistency of Defoe's opposition to ghost-belief over the course of his career is adduced as one reason for thinking that this work is not by him.

[12] At least one apparition sighting reported in this book appears to be based on an experience of Defoe's (see pp. 158–60 below, where a merchant sees one of his apprentices both in the 'Counting-house' and the 'Dining Room', and judges the former an apparition), yet it is significant that he does not identify it as his own; 'the following I can vouch from my own Knowledge', he says, but this is very different from his frequent and unabashed claims to have been the beneficiary of impulses and warnings addressed to him by 'Spirits in the Invisible World'.

In any case, ghosts occupy a prominent place in Defoe's anatomy of the Invisible World. Sometimes solemnly, sometimes wittily, he spells out his grounds for thinking there are no such things, devoting the bulk of several chapters to the subject. For him the Scriptural evidence is decidedly negative. The figure presented to Saul by the witch of Endor is not Samuel's ghost (1 Samuel 28:14: see p. 76). The figure walking on the water that appears to the apostles (Matthew 14:26) is not Christ's ghost. Most crucially, Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16) are souls in heaven and hell rather than ghosts; Abraham makes clear to both that they must stay where they are, and that nobody returns to earth after death, even for so good a cause as bringing about the repentance of sinners. The 'great gulf' is fixed and impassable. Besides these Biblical passages, Defoe marshals various arguments of his own. A restless soul himself, he is able to put himself imaginatively in the situations of the blessed and the damned contemplating trips back to earth. He concludes that those in heaven have better things to attend to, and those in hell are also otherwise engaged: neither of them 'appear again, or concern themselves in the Affairs of Life', because 'the Good would not if they could, and the Bad could not if they would' (p. 128).

Defoe's object, however, is not merely to repudiate a fallacious specimen of the supernatural, for at various points ghost-belief is the tool rather than the object of his satire. Inviting us to imagine the implications if there *were* such a thing as ghosts, and they *could* come back to earth on the errands popularly assigned to them, he conjures up a grimly carnivalesque, upside-down world.[13] 'THE Doctrine of disquiet Souls returning hither, to do or obtain Justice, to make or demand Restitution, and that they could not be at rest 'till such and such things were settled, Wills perform'd, dispossess'd Heirs righted, conceal'd Treasons discover'd, conceal'd Treasures found out, and the like, were it true, would make the World uninhabitable: Ghosts and Apparitions would walk the Streets at Noon-Day; and the living might go on one side of the Street, and the dead on the other; the latter would be infinitely more numerous' (pp. 125–6). He mocks the idea of souls being rousted out from heaven or hell to deal with mundane mat-

[13] Much of Chapter VII (pp. 109–27) is devoted to '*the many strange Inconveniences and ill Consequences which would attend us in this World, if the Souls of Men and Women … departed, were at Liberty to visit the Earth*': e.g. 'what work would it make among us? how many wealthy Landlords would be turn'd out of Possession, and rich Tradesmen oblig'd to refund? How would the strong Oppressor be challeng'd by the weak, the injur'd Poor be the ruin of the Rich? How many Adulterers would be bound to dislodge from the Arms of the fair Intruder? How many injur'd Ladies would claim their Properties, and turn the Usurpers out of Bed?' (p. 122).

ters: this lends itself to the kind of wry merriment that enlivens much of the book, and also to a homiletic topos that Defoe and many earlier preachers were fond of developing: how petty our worldly concerns must appear from the vantage point of souls in heaven.

Within the rhetorical economy I have been sketching, ghost-belief is treated as a variant of fanaticism; Defoe denigrates it not only because he sincerely deems it mistaken and pernicious, but because by doing so he can further demonstrate that his own views regarding the supernatural are, in contrast, sound and wholesome. The function of ghost-belief is therefore similar to that of Roman Catholicism: it is yet another specimen of the enthusiasm and delusion of others – unlike his own moderate, sensible position, embodying 'the receiv'd Opinions of all the reform'd Churches'.[14]

If, in works generally accepted as his, Defoe seriously entertained the possibility of Providential voices warning us of what we should do or avoid, of our being able to see or hear other people from afar, or of our being prompted to mischief by the Devil, why (it would seem reasonable nowadays to ask) should he have baulked at a belief in witches or ghosts? To believe in them, or in apparitions, or the 'second sight', seems to most of us no more outlandish than to suppose, for example (as Crusoe and his creator apparently do), that a Caribbean hurricane, which sinks a ship and drowns everyone else on board, is contrived by God as a warning to Crusoe to repent (although he fails at the time to understand this forcible but less-than-explicit message). From a modern perspective, these beliefs are liable to seem more or less equivalent and interchangeable: everything associated with the 'invisible world' smacks of superstition, so why draw the line at one or another of what appear to be equally untenable beliefs? Or rather, why suppose that Defoe, who evidently subscribed to some of them, did not accept all of them?

The answer to this is partly historical: within Defoe's lifetime, attitudes toward these topics were in flux, and belief in some did not entail belief in all. When he was born, publicly questioning any one of them provoked heated controversy;[15] by the time he died, sceptics were challenging

[14] Although he refers in passing to limbo, Defoe does not exploit the historical connection between Catholicism and ghosts, in which the doctrine of purgatory was a major link. Because some Anglicans believed in ghosts, whereas few or no Dissenters did, Defoe may have thought it prudent to avoid suggesting that ghost-belief differs along denominational lines. The position he occupies must be seen as the central, broadly Protestant one, not a marginal, narrowly sectarian one.

[15] E.g. Hobbes's challenge to the notion of apparitions in *Leviathan* (1651): attempts at refutation are surveyed by Samuel I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1962).

everything to do with the supernatural. Open avowals of atheism were still rare, yet books and pamphlets denying the existence of apparitions, ghosts, angels and other spirits were becoming common, and usually sprang from the motive that Hobbes and his followers had all along been accused of: that is, to cast doubt on the existence of any immaterial entity, and thus to challenge traditional notions of the soul and God. Although they often pretended, in the spirit of ongoing reform, to be purifying Christianity from the accretions derived from paganism and Popery, the freethinkers were perceived rightly as attacking its fundamentals. Hence the importance to Defoe of regarding apparitions not as a superfluity or excrescence on faith, whose removal would leave everything else intact and strengthened, but as one in a series of links that support a belief in the existence and immortality of the soul.

Recent research on several of these subjects – for instance, on the decline in witchcraft belief between the 1680s and the 1720s[16] – suggests that even though attackers and defenders alike recognised a degree of connectedness among these phenomena, one could renounce belief in some without rejecting them all. In the case of both witches and the Devil, Defoe had no doubt that they had existed, because the Bible said so, or that having existed once, they could exist still (or exist again): '*what has been may be*', as he said in another context.[17] From Defoe's perspective, Satan stands for important forces in the moral economy of the world: his scope and power shrink under Defoe's analysis, and his ultimate role in Defoe's cosmology is drastically diminished, yet his reality is never denied. It is important for Defoe to be able to affirm his existence, not because he can find a great deal for him to do in the modern world, but because abandoning him to the sceptical gainsayers would remove yet another support

[16] See particularly Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations c. 1650–c. 1750* (Oxford, 1997), the fifth chapter of which considers Defoe at some length. Bostridge maintains that 'the picture of [Defoe as] a progressive, secular-minded Whig is not entirely plausible … Defoe's supernaturalism was not some quirk or a cobwebby vestigial corner of his imagination, but part of a conservative and religious cast of mind' (p. 122). Defoe's complex mentality may not fit neatly within either alternative, yet the latter is, as Bostridge suggests, the one usually overlooked. Cf. also R. D. Stock's useful chapter on 'The Witch of Endor and the Gadarene Swine: The Debate over Witchcraft and Miracles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' in *The Holy and the Demonic from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 61–116. Stock considers Robinson Crusoe's terrible dream 'the most extraordinary recreation of a numinous experience that I know of in the early eighteenth century', and writes well about it (pp. 111–13).

[17] *Review*, 17 November 1705.

(like the already exploded belief in witchcraft) for the reality of an invisible world of spirit and soul.

More pressing for Defoe was the question whether, in post-Apostolic times, any given assertion that the Devil or an apparition had appeared, or had done such and such, could be tested and confirmed. To doubt the validity of most modern claims about them would not necessarily cause him to conclude that they do not exist.[18] Nowadays Satan and his minions may not range up and down quite so freely, seeking people to 'devour', but this does not mean that they no longer pose active threats. And even if rigorous scrutiny had been fatal to most accounts of their modern manifestations, this could not undo retroactively their reality as vouched for by the Bible; at any rate not for those like Defoe who thought various supernatural phenomena (most notably miracles) that had revealed the divine will during Old and New Testament times had become unnecessary once the Church and the Scriptures were on a firm footing. That miracles do not occur now does not mean, according to Defoe's reasoning, that they had never occurred – contrary to the thinking of those who held that miracles could never have taken place, since nature's laws are constant. Yet there is no question that the sceptical analysis of Hobbes and later Saddu-

[18] For a good statement of this paradoxical position, that the thing itself might well exist even though modern accounts fail to prove its existence, see Addison's remarks in *The Spectator* (14 July 1711), ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1965), Vol. I, p. 480:

> When I hear the Relations that are made from all parts of the World, not only from *Norway* and *Lapland*, from the *East* and *West Indies*, but from every particular Nation in *Europe*, I cannot forbear thinking that there is such an Intercourse and Commerce with Evil Spirits, as that which we express by the name of Witchcraft. But when I consider that the ignorant and credulous Parts of the World abound most in these Relations, and that the Persons among us who are supposed to engage in such an Infernal Commerce are People of a weak Understanding and crazed Imagination, and at the same time reflect upon the many Impostures and Delusions of this Nature that have been detected in all Ages, I endeavour to suspend my Belief till I hear more certain Accounts than any which have yet come to my Knowledge. In short, when I consider the Question, Whether there are such Persons in the World as those we call Witches? my Mind is divided between the two opposite Opinions, or rather (to speak my Thoughts freely) 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.

Cf. Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York, 1976), p. 93, who quotes a similar passage from George Berkeley, approving the decision of a court which had convicted eight women on charges of witchcraft: 'I do not believe one in a thousand of these stories to be true, so neither on the other hand do I see sufficient grounds to conclude peremptorily against plain matter of fact well attested'.

cees weakened popular belief in devils, angels, apparitions and the like: otherwise there would have been no occasion for treatises (or *Essays*) designed to persuade readers of their reality and their ongoing activity. We may lump all these beliefs together under the rubric of 'the occult', but Defoe and his contemporaries did not. To avoid falling into the extremes of superstition and enthusiasm on the one hand, or of freethinking rationalism and atheistic materialism on the other, many steered what they thought was a middle course, giving assent to some beliefs and withholding it from others. So it was possible to believe in communion with spirits yet not in witches or ghosts, and this was Defoe's position.

During his lifetime, various elements of the supernatural tended to migrate from the category of things having an existence of their own in the external world toward the category of things created by, and existing in, the human imagination. Defoe himself feels free to write quite facetiously about Satan's modern career, here and in *The Political History of the Devil*, because that personage had undergone considerable shrinkage in his ontological as well as his demonic stature. Despite the credentials he brings from the Bible and *Paradise Lost*, Defoe's Satan (one could argue) is very much Defoe's creation; like all his other characters, whether historical or imaginary, Satan is only as real as Defoe can make him. And this is true of the extraordinary objects and events as well as the supernatural beings in Defoe's works: whatever his personal convictions about their inherent reality or their significance, their reality within his writings depends on the plausibility he can bestow on them, and their significance depends on the persuasiveness of his (or his characters') interpretations of them. If they are real, it is because he makes them real; if they point to larger 'truths' (such as the existence of a divine Providence that concerns itself with human affairs), it is because Defoe (or his fictional spokesperson) makes these seem reasonable inferences from the events themselves. By and large his works of the 1720s still take for granted the validity of a traditional religious world-view, but do not depend for their own meaning or force on prior assent to its doctrines. Instead, these works follow a process nearly the reverse, seeking to defend a beleaguered creed through compelling interpretations of compelling stories.

Defoe treats the *History* and the *Reality* of apparitions as connected, yet the former does not straightforwardly support the latter. He believes that history can, in principle, provide the kind of validation his general claims require. But when he subjects individual case histories to close scrutiny, he is willing to write off many (indeed most) apparition sightings as mistaken or fraudulent; or rather, he is happy to do so, since this evidence of guard-

edness and scepticism helps him (rhetorically if not logically) establish the genuineness of others. Instead of lengthy and inconclusive discussions of the theoretical or practical possibility of the existence of apparitions, the process of testing concentrates on the evidence for and against the validity of reported occurrences, from antiquity to the present. For this purpose his criteria are varied, and draw on habits of mind that are as much legal and judicial as historical. He regularly considers the circumstances affecting the credibility of those to whom apparitions appeared, and the modes of transmission through which apparition narratives reach us from remote times and places.

By applying the test of *cui bono* – that is, by asking whose interests may be served by an apparition's appearing, or by the propagation of a story about its appearing – Defoe is able to ridicule the widespread belief that most apparitions involve the Devil or his agents. He observes sensibly that in most of these cases, where people are warned of dangers facing them, prompted to desist from evildoing, and so on, it would be contrary to Satan's nature and his goals to intervene so benignly in human affairs. Elsewhere he invokes the same principle to point out that a supposed errand is too trivial to enlist the efforts of any supernatural agent. He probes character and motive, exposes narrative gaps and inconsistencies, and measures allegations against ordinary experience.

To suggest that Defoe's way of analysing these narratives is that of a shrewd literary critic may seem an instance of overvaluing one's own line of work at the expense of philosophical, historical and theological accomplishments of which he may have been prouder. But what distinguishes this book from other collections of such stories is not only its so-called circumstantial realism – its way of making supernatural subject matter believable through ordinary characters, vernacular speech, homely detail, and other down-to-earth devices – but also Defoe's frequent interruptions to comment on the stories he tells, and the elaborate critiques he appends to most of them. Indeed, his willingness to disrupt the flow of narrative and dialogue indicates that realism for its own sake is not his chief objective. His dedication to interpreting tales of the supernatural, rather than merely exploiting their potential as stories, wards off the aspersions of sensationalism that his subject matter might seem to invite. Defoe was genuinely interested in the legalistic sifting of questionable testimony, in all the ways people delude themselves and one another, and in his self-appointed role as defender of the faith; had he been less so, the book might have had more excitement, but also less depth. Without its critical commentary, he would have regarded it as a mere collection of old wives' tales:

at best, a source of uneasy titters or goose pimples, an empty pastime for credulous, simple folk with time on their hands; at worst, not merely trivial but malign, since such tales can make people nervous and fearful, and can inculcate superstition – which is not an innocuous surplus of legitimate belief, in Defoe's opinion, but an alternative to true belief. A *History* of apparitions untrammelled by concern over their *Reality* would therefore have seemed to him a rather shady undertaking.

The relationship between the *History* and the *Reality* of apparitions is problematic both in itself and as one variant of a set of larger relationships – between the realm of narrative on the one hand, and matters of belief, truth and value on the other. The problem is posed, for example, by Defoe's frequent claims elsewhere that the worth of a story, or the very reason for its existence, is that it exemplifies some moral or spiritual principles. By modern readers such claims have been met with various degrees of scepticism. Are these pretences to edification sheer hypocrisy, at odds with the subject matter, tone and emphasis of the stories themselves, particularly the more titillating ones like *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*? Are Defoe's prefatory protestations mere gestures to allay the misgivings of staid readers, wary of entering imaginatively into the lives of thieves, whores and other adventurers? His efforts to portray sensational stories as having loftier goals are undoubtedly sanctimonious and self-serving, but are they necessarily meretricious and absurd? Or should his prefaces be regarded instead as symptoms, fascinating in their very tensions and exaggerations, of a genuine if seldom successful struggle to reconcile fiction with truth, imagination with reality? Approached in this latter context, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* differ more in degree than in kind from the other works that sought to combine edifying didacticism with 'Strange Surprising Adventures' such as Crusoe's, or with even more deviant doings. In this respect Defoe's fictional works are akin not only to such genres as criminal biography, where lurid tales of aberrant activity regularly purport to have been composed and published for their instructiveness, but also to various genres with which they are not usually associated, such as accounts of witches, ghosts, apparitions and other supernatural phenomena.

Modern readers tend to credit works of the latter sort with the worthy aims professed by their authors, who are taken at their word about their high-minded motives: mostly Anglican or Dissenting divines, their clerical status guarantees the sincerity of their proclaimed desire to do good. (In contrast, an anonymous writer is presumed to be a mercenary, whose prefatory flourishes about the truthfulness or usefulness of the text are discounted as mere window dressing.) Yet various divines recognised that in

becoming story-tellers, they were laying themselves open to the doubts and misgivings that serious readers have always felt toward accounts of the extraordinary that are not clearly labelled as fiction. They might not be quite as concerned over accusations of venality as the denizens of Grub Street, who depended on their pens for their livelihood and had no reputations to lose: by the very act of signing what they wrote, public figures like Richard Baxter and Increase Mather were (among other things) making clear that theirs were not just catchpenny works, responding to market demand for lively accounts of angels, ghosts, witches, and the like. All the same, such authors often express a fear of being mistaken for yarn spinners. Baxter, respected by the Anglican establishment as well as his fellow Dissenters, feels obliged to explain, in the preface to his *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, that 'The uses hereof I mention before the Book, that the Reader may know that I write it for *Practice*, and not to please Men with the Strangeness and Novelty of useless Stories'.[19] Joseph Glanvill, whose *Saducismus Triumphatus* was the best and most influential collection of such stories, appearing in numerous editions throughout Defoe's lifetime, is similarly intent on dissociating himself from mere entertainers:

> I have no humour nor delight in telling Stories, and do not publish *these* for the gratification of those that have; but I record them as *Arguments* for the *confirmation* of a Truth which hath indeed been attested by multitudes of the like Evidences in all places and times … I know it is a matter of very little Credit to be a Relator of Stories, and I of all Men living, have the least reason to be fond of the Imployment. For I never had any faculty in telling of a Story, and have always had a particular indisposition and backwardness to the writing any such.

'Of all Relations of Fact', Glanvill continues, 'there are none like to give a Man such trouble and disreputation, as those that relate to *Witchcraft* and *Apparitions*, which so great a party of Men (in this age especially) do so railly and laugh at, and … are resolved to explode and despise as meer Winter Tales and old Wives Fables'.[20]

[19] Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits and, consequently, of the Immortality of Souls. Of the Malice and Misery of the Devils and the Damned: and of the Blessedness of the Justified, fully evinced by the unquestionable Histories of Apparitions, Operations, Witchcrafts, Voices, &c.* (1691), Preface, sig. [A4ʳ].

[20] Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus; or, Full and Plain Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681), facs. of the 1689 edn, ed. Coleman O. Parsons (Gainesville, 1966), Preface to Part I, p. 64, Preface to Part II, sig. [R1ʳ].

'I am not pretending to write a Collection of old Stories', Defoe himself declares; 'if I did I should call it a History of all the Chimney-Corners in the three Kingdoms' (p. 211). He protests repeatedly that he is not a mere purveyor of 'the old Women's Stories, which we have told us' (p. 305), or of 'the good old Tales, which serve to make up Winter Evening Conversation' (p. 305). But the old wives' tale, he implies, is the genre to which most existing books on the subject belong. The problem is not their lack of novelty, although he congratulates himself on this score as well, so much as their simple-mindedness. They set out to combat Sadducism by multiplying apparition stories and treating all of them as evidence of the existence of the invisible world. But they lack the ordinary common sense, let alone the forensic rigour, that would enable them to show convincingly that the link between any given apparition story and its reality is a necessary one. If the case for the reality of apparitions remains unproved, there is no point in going on (as Glanvill and others do with considerable fanfare) to contend that the reality of apparitions shows that spirit, soul, etc. must be real, too.

In other words, it might be logical to infer the reality of souls from the reality of apparitions, but as Defoe realised, the prior connection was more crucial and challenging. To get from the *story* of an apparition to the *reality* of apparitions, something other than logic, and more like a leap of faith, seems to be required. Yet this difficulty was one instance of a more general problem, that of assessing the truthfulness of any report. Within the legal system this challenge arose daily, every time testimony had to be weighed by a judge or jury. The same question had even more far-reaching implications when it was raised by the Bible: a great deal was at stake over the veracity of this particular collection of ancient stories. Later debates over the miracles in the Bible turned on this very issue, the reliability of testimonial evidence.[21] Of lesser urgency or moment, perhaps, was yet another version of the same problem, posed by many early eighteenth-century books including Defoe's: how are we to distinguish between a 'true history', a novel or romance, and a downright lie? To modern readers, especially those of a literary or historical bent, this might seem the most interesting form of the question; my point here is that all these variants of it were regarded as equivalent, in substance if not in gravity, by Defoe and

[21] Hume's doubts about the validity of such evidence are at the core of his critique in 'An Essay on Miracles' in *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748); defences such as George Campbell's in *A Dissertation on Miracles* (1762) hinge on the argument that *some* testimony is trustworthy, warranting belief in *some* miracles.

his contemporaries.[22] A 'Chimney-corner Tale, fit for a Legend, and not capable of any manner of Improvement'[23] is judged and found wanting – a mere 'Tale' or 'Legend' – according to the same criteria brought to bear on Scripture, an affidavit, or a work of Defoe's, whether it calls itself an *Essay,* a *History*, or a *Life.*

In any case, discussions of Defoe's theory of fiction have focused on the statements of his views in fictional works purporting to be non-fiction, and on his passing comments elsewhere on histories, romances, novels and lying. Works like the *History and Reality of Apparitions* show that Defoe thought as deeply about these matters when he approached them from the opposite direction, and instead of trying to justify the historicity or truthfulness of stories that were clearly 'made up', examined the grounds on which durable and widely credited histories established their veracity. In both cases we may feel that Defoe has ulterior motives as strong as his love of truth, and that his interest in determining the conditions that make us give or refuse credence to what we read is seldom merely theoretical. At the same time, it cannot be said that he is a cynical advocate whose methods and results depend on whether the prosecution or the defence has retained him. When he approaches the subject as he does here, impugning rather than upholding the credibility of many of the stories that he collects from other sources, his criteria are as rigorous as those he imagines sceptical readers will bring to bear on his own narratives.

In one major respect, however, his handling of sacred and profane stories is not even-handed, for he begs a crucial question. Of all books, the one about which problems of authenticity were most pressing was the Bible, yet Defoe treats its essential historicity as an established fact. He recognises that its status as a divinely dictated, divinely accurate record of antiquity is being questioned, and that there are readers for whom his

[22] Literary and moral aspects of the question are surveyed briefly in 'Fiction and Mendacity', an appendix to my *Defoe and Casuistry* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 190–211; a fascinating discussion of the connectedness of its legal and religious aspects is Alexander Welsh's 'The Evidence of Things Not Seen: Justice Stephen and Bishop Butler', *Representations*, 22 (1988), pp. 60–88. Among explicit linkages between the assessment of apparition accounts and legal testimonies, cf. John Beaumont, *Gleanings of Antiquities. Containing … III. Some Notes concerning Familiar Spirits* (1724), p. 195; after citing Melancthon and two other worthies, he says, 'Now if any Man shall confidently tell me that these are all Illusions, as many are apt to do, and laugh at such Experiences; when I am convinc'd that these Laughers are Men of more Learning and Candor than the foregoing Testimonies, I may consider farther of it: Mean while, I hope they will give me leave to have such Regard for their negative against three good positive Evidences, as a Court of Judicature is commonly wont to have'.

[23] *A System of Magick* in *Satire, Fantasy, and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe*, Vol. 7, ed. Peter Elmer, p. 58.

citation of a pertinent scriptural text is no longer an acceptable argument, let alone a clinching one. Skilful as he is at analysing stories of all kinds, he tries to exempt the Bible from critical scrutiny, beyond drawing distinctions between literal and figurative passages, or historical and parabolic ones. He evidently feels that to go beyond this, by treating as an open question the historical validity of Scripture, is to venture into the domain of freethinkers and atheists. They pretended that their aim was to purify religion by exploding myths and legends that had found their way into the sacred text through priestly invention, ignorant enthusiasm and Near Eastern superstition. But critics of the extraordinary situations and events in the Bible actually sought to undermine, as Defoe realised, faith in anything beyond the ordinary, familiar and tangible, and thus to do away with such notions as God or the soul.

One of the ironies of the *History and Reality of Apparitions*, however, is that Defoe himself depends on the employment of similarly shrewd, sceptical techniques to weigh and find wanting most of the stories he introduces. To demonstrate that they are mere fables, hollow or nugatory in themselves, Defoe has to use the same tools as his freethinking opponents; he traces these latter-day legends to the same set of deliberate machinations, vulgar errors, physiological or psychological disorders, and wilful or involuntary self-deceptions identified by his atheistical antagonists as the source of Biblical falsehood and error. This is not to suggest that Defoe is unwittingly complicit in the enterprise of unbelief, weakening religion by using the tools of its enemies. All the same, his position is inherently ambiguous, because he wants to show that reason and religion are compatible, and wants to exemplify in his own attitudes and procedures an ideal synthesis of the two, as remote from the fanaticism of some believers as from the atheism of some philosophers.

Along with its calm, deliberate scrutiny of rather sensational material, Defoe's treatment of tales of the supernatural has a further ingredient less typical of most Biblical or classical scholarship: a remarkable appetite for actual experience. This was not confined to the far-flung adventures of colourful characters, but extended to the seemingly banal family and business difficulties of people more like his bourgeois readers and himself. Although he weighs seriously the authenticity and the significance of the stories he tells, Defoe also cares about them as stories. He may not be as credulous about the wonders of the invisible world as the Burtons, Brownes, Glanvills and Aubreys who precede him, but he approaches reports of the marvellous with much the same zest and curiosity. His capacity to revel in

the sheer richness and variety of experience, whether bizarre or everyday, is as great as theirs, even though he is by no means as 'wide-eyed'.

On the other hand, it could be objected that the *History and Reality of Apparitions* tends to domesticate the marvellous: that the techniques of circumstantial realism, as well as the rationalising codas to various stories, serve to naturalise the supernatural, and dispel the air of mystery relished by writers and readers of seventeenth-century accounts of witchcraft, apparitions, and other such phenomena. Having ventured into the ethereal, the *unheimlich* and the diabolic, Defoe usually returns sooner or later to the prosaic, the homely, and the all-too-human. Particularly fatal, on this view, to a sustained aura of the mystical and otherworldly is Defoe's irony at the expense of superstitious inflation and mystification, everything 'Platonick' and over-refined, the illusions of 'Visionists' and spiritual mountebanks. His satiric humour could thus be seen as a force dangerously akin to, if not necessarily allied with, the scepticism of those he counted as enemies, whose mockery was directed beyond their ostensible target, the extravagances of superstition, to religious belief of any kind. As the early critical fortunes of *A Tale of a Tub* illustrate, laughter in the neighbourhood of the sacred is liable to be mistaken for laughter *at* the sacred. Perhaps to avoid this danger, Defoe draws a sharp (if artificial) line between legitimate and illegitimate objects of belief, and is careful to ridicule only the latter. But he is so intent on showing that he cannot be taken in by religious enthusiasm, over-active 'fancy', hypochondriac 'vapors', or the impostures of priests and politicians, and so intent on being lively and amusing rather than ponderous and solemn, that at times he sounds as worldly and rationalistic as his adversaries.

Undue focus on Defoe's critical detachment, or more generally on his rhetoric of moderation, is liable to obscure the ways in which his thinking, and the book as a whole, are in fact venturesome, colourful, and even extreme. He cultivates an air of authorial probity and restraint amidst what is, after all, a chronicle of wildness and excess. This image of himself as reasonable and decorous is no mere pretence, but it is not the whole truth, either. It is as if Crusoe's father, advocating prudent acquiescence in the 'middle station of life' as against the risks of seafaring, expressed fully the position of Defoe or the values endorsed by the book. In analogous fashion, there is sometimes considerable tension in the *History and Reality of Apparitions* between the sober commentary of the authorial voice and the flamboyant eccentricity of the stories it deals with. Without quite making odd and irrational tales sound normal and reasonable, the critical machinery that surrounds them does push them in that direction. There could

have been no *Robinson Crusoe* if the elder Crusoe's sage advice had prevailed; if Defoe's editorial commentary had neutralised these weird narratives altogether by bringing them into the light of day, there could still have been a *History and Reality of Apparitions*, but a more ponderous and prosaic work than the one we have.

In fact, the book never settles into bland, sanitised respectability. One factor may be the sheer impossibility of reducing vivid narrative to one or another exemplary function, however well-chosen and capacious the interpretive formula – especially when it is applied retroactively, to a story already told. Another factor may be almost as important. What I have been saying about Defoe's rhetoric of moderation may suggest that its effect is simply to tame the unruly, to domesticate the far-fetched, and thus to reduce the wonderful and extraordinary to the realm of the prosaic and the ordinary. Far from casting a pall of sameness and good sense over the vitality of narrative, however, his commentary has a vigour and variety of its own. Indeed, the situation can be reversed: unpromising stretches of story can themselves become occasions for intellectual fireworks, ranging from animated argument through satiric laughter to impassioned jeremiads.

This complex relationship between story and commentary can be brought out by another glance at the role of Defoe's narrator in *A Journal of the Plague Year*. H. F.'s repudiation of extremes – fanaticism on the one hand, atheism on the other – serves primarily to strengthen his interpretation of the nature of the plague, and by extension his views about combating it. But it also stands in an interesting relation to the narrative itself: although tales of horror are framed within H. F.'s calm, judicious remarks on them, this bracketing does not soften or undo their grim force. The shocking abnormality of life and death during the plague is magnified, not lessened, by being mediated through a point of view that is itself so engagingly normal.

Similar claims can be made for the effect of Defoe's commentary on supernatural stories in the *History and Reality of Apparitions*. Like H. F. venturing into the stricken city, Defoe here takes us on a Dantesque tour of the invisible world; the fact that both guides have their feet so firmly on the ground heightens, by contrast, the other-worldliness of their material. By being juxtaposed with the rational, the irrational is not necessarily unravelled or dispelled. Although Defoe analyses many stories to show that they can be explained in natural terms, even those (until we reach the priestly frauds of the closing chapters) are not simply debunked, in the sense of rendered meaningless or empty. On the contrary, many of these

episodes carry out a satiric programme that informs much of the *History and Reality of Apparitions* as well as the *History of the Devil*: the demonstration that all kinds of bizarre events and behaviour, ordinarily blamed on supernatural agents, can be traced squarely to human knavery and folly. Thus 'rational' analysis reduces the supernatural status but not the moral significance or the sheer drama of numerous stories.

A reader who finds these tales as primitive as the 'pawawing' of savages that Defoe scoffs at, and dismisses every one of them as incredible, may see little point in quibbling over the different kinds or degrees of 'reality' they possess. The effort nevertheless seems worthwhile, not because it will persuade anyone that these are true 'histories', or that they prove the 'reality' of anything but Defoe's imaginative and satiric energy, but because it can illuminate some of the problems that arise in discussing early works of fiction. Early realism is thought of as avoiding the far-fetched, which smacks of the romance, and cultivating the homely and familiar, which become hallmarks of the novel; the rare and improbable give way to the common and quotidian. From this perspective, if Defoe is writing to be believed, he is handicapping himself in this book by choosing such outlandish subject matter, and by providing rational explanations for some but not all of it.

To this there are several possible responses. One is to emphasise the normalising tendency that has been mentioned already: to some extent Defoe does tone down the other-worldly, making it seem more mundane, and therefore less alien and anomalous. But only up to a point; it bears repeating that Defoe should not be identified with Crusoe's fogyish father, who dwells on the safe and insipid to keep at bay the dangerous and disruptive. A different response would be to question the conception of realism as something that culminates in the great novels of the 1740s and 50s, and to think of it instead as a development that emerges fully only in the 1790s and subsequent decades, but is adumbrated at various points in Defoe's writings – in such passages, for example, as Crusoe's encounters with the single footprint, or the glowing eyes in the cave, or the threatening angel in his dream. However we choose to describe it, the vividness, the emotional intensity, and the memorability of these episodes surely involves a kind of realism, but one that we associate more with Lewis or Maturin than with Fielding or Richardson; and this Proto-Gothic variety of realism is present in various passages of the *History and Reality of Apparitions* as well.[24]

[24] A suggestive exploration of this connection is Troy Boone's 'Narrating the Apparition: Glanvill, Defoe, and the Rise of Gothic Fiction', *The Eighteenth Century*, 35 (1994), pp. 178–82.

Furthermore, the Gothic analogy may help to clarify Defoe's treatment of different kinds of weird situations. In some instances his procedure resembles that of Radcliffe, in which a supernatural-seeming phenomenon is eventually explained in naturalistic terms. He does this, for example, with a murderer who returns to the scene of his crime many years later, gets caught up in a crowd chasing a different criminal, and falls down and confesses his crime in the mistaken belief that he is the one being pursued (pp. 116–20). Defoe makes clear that the man's fearful visions and his self-betrayal are products of his own guilty terror, yet his aim is not to restore a reassuring air of rationality and order. He seeks to demonstrate that this bizarre chain of events is owing chiefly 'to the Fury of an enrag'd Conscience' (p. 120); the fact that 'here was no Apparition … no Spectre, no Ghost … NO *Devil* or Evil Spirit … NO Soul of the deceased, however injur'd' (p. 120) does not dispel the uncanniness of the man's collapsing 'just against the very Door of the House where the Person liv'd that he had murther'd' (p. 119). As in the *Political History of the Devil*, where Satan is absolved of responsibility for various actions laid to his charge, Defoe's object in this passage is not to purge the world of such beings but to clear them of false aspersions. As a consequence, he emerges sounding judicious and fair, but the world itself remains as perilous as ever – except for someone whose 'constant Temper's all Serene and Clear; First, free from Guilt, and therefore free from fear' (see Explanatory Notes, note 346, below, p. 354).

In other words, even after Defoe shows that a pretended or imagined supernatural event should be ascribed to other causes, a considerable element of mystery can persist; not when he has debunked a piece of Popish imposture, which leaves little residue of any kind, but when (as here) the source of trouble is the human mind, crazed by guilt, fanaticism, or some other form of overheated imagination. Many later investigators were determined to trace all such phenomena to mental aberration or psychological distress;[25] he is not, even though he is well aware of the mind's capacity to delude and torture itself. My point is not that Defoe was more concerned than his successors to keep open the possibility of supernatural causation (although this is the case), but rather that even when he can

[25] Along these lines, a substantial literature on dreams, apparitions and related phenomena emerged in the era when Gothic fiction was popular; among others, see Robert Gray, *The Theory of Dreams*, 2 vols (1808); Samuel Hibbert, *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions; or, an Attempt to trace such Illusions to their Physical Causes* (2nd edn, Edinburgh and London, 1825); and the final sections of Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Witchcraft and Demonology* (1830).

identify 'natural' causes, his doing so does not transform the world into a sunny, orderly, unthreatening place.

Some episodes chronicle seemingly supernatural doings but offer no common-sense explanations for them; others provide explanations that cannot cancel retroactively the impression of the uncanny that has already been created; and still others hold out the possibility that one or another supernatural agent *is* responsible: never a ghost, very seldom an angel or devil, occasionally (although less often than people suppose) the apparition of a spirit. Some of the longer stories develop a narrative momentum that carries them beyond Defoe's explanations; thus the *Owke Mouraski* story (pp. 85–94) cannot quite be contained by the categories proposed for it, and is explained differently when it is retold in the *Political History of the Devil*. Nor is any thesis about the nature or function of apparitions illustrated by the Beacon story (pp. 158–60); one of the more gruesome and up-to-date instances of the dream-apparition genre, Defoe does not interpret it as shedding light on the source, purpose or meaning of such experiences. Further cases will be noted below, in connection with questions of technique and style; most of them, in which not-quite-human beings intervene in the lives of ordinary people, can be thought of as proto-Gothic in entertaining the very possibility that such creatures exist, not to speak of assigning them crucial roles in the action.

In this book Defoe is sometimes earnest, sometimes witty; his tone shifts frequently and abruptly. He repeatedly worries about becoming unduly solemn, and thus failing to provide the entertainment that the age demands. He seeks to instruct and edify, but his seriousness is mixed here with a degree of levity unmatched in most of his other books, except for the *Political History of the Devil*, with which it has much in common. Throughout his career he had enforced his irony with wry humour, but his laughter tended to be bitter and mocking rather than genial or sportive. In the *History and Reality of Apparitions* and other works of the late 1720s, his wit retains its trenchancy, but takes on some comic buoyancy as well; although never altogether light-hearted, his lifelong relish for the absurd here becomes a droll, wintry waggishness. Sometimes he himself is its pretended object: 'I return to the Subject, lest I should be but an Apparition my self' (p. 53); 'I must be cautious how I lay too much stress upon [the Comfort of a good Conscience] … lest I should be call'd Religious and Grave, which is as much as to say Mad' (p. 214); 'if I have been preaching a little, it is so little in length … that you may forgive me for once, especially upon Promise of saying as little for your Good for the time to come, as I can' (p. 260). In such instances, Defoe is of course deriding the shallow

worldliness of readers, not his own efforts to enlighten them. Scoffing at the idea that humans live on any planet other than Earth, he says of hypothetical Martians that they 'must be dried up sufficiently for pulverizing on any suitable Occasion' (p. 63); life on Venus would require people who 'could live always in a hot Bath, and neither sweat out their Souls, or melt their Bodies' (p. 62). Even at its most playful, his humour often has an aggressive edge. He concludes a summary of the fable of Jupiter and Europa with the quip, 'Indeed when Ladies come to ride upon Bulls, what can they expect'? (p. 275). If we suppose that the souls of the deceased have anything to do with the affairs of the living, we must accept this bizarre scenario, 'That a Soul dismiss'd from Life, and going directly into Heaven, shall be call'd back by the Cry of the Children after her, with a *hold! stay* Mother*! come back,* and come and *tell us where the Writings are for your Joynture,* or *we shall be undone*? and the poor Mother, Uncas'd, Unembodied, must come back, dismiss the Angels that were carrying her into *Abraham*'s Bosom, and bid them come for her another time; and here she must hover about we know not how many Years, to do Right to these Children' (p. 241). Surely, Defoe concludes, 'the same Power that could thus interrupt her Passage into Heaven, might have prevented her separating from the Body, and she might with as much ease, and less injustice to her self, have been kept out of the Grave, as kept out of Heaven' (p. 241). This sort of thing, as Defoe observes, 'cannot go down with rational People … who can make a serious thing of a piece of ridiculous Nonsense'? (p. 241). Instead of merely castigating a belief in revenants as 'ridiculous Nonsense', Defoe makes his point amusingly and effectively by staging a bit of comic drama. Like the tongue-in-cheek line in the *Farther Adventures*, where Crusoe 'speaks in colours' by calling the great wall of China 'a most excellent thing to keep off the Tartars', the austere humour of the *History and Reality of Apparitions* usually has a tendentious purpose, and seldom seems an exercise of wit for its own sake.[26]

Defoe cultivates an air of reasonableness in order to suggest that his position on disputed theological matters is a moderate and judicious one. He creates this impression partly by distancing himself from extreme positions, partly by advancing his opinions in tentative and qualified terms, and partly by making statements that convey, through their structural

[26] For further specimens of tendentious humour, see the denunciation of a fool on p. 72, and of Jacob Boehme as someone whose mystical comprehension of 'GOD, *Futurity, Eternity*, and all occult and retir'd things' had 'this unhappy disaster attending it, *viz*. That he could never express himself, no not to his own Understanding; so that indeed he understood this only, namely, that he could not understand what he did understand' (p. 252).

equilibrium, a sense that these are the balanced thoughts of an even-handed person. To achieve this effect, the *History and Reality of Apparitions* abounds in ordering devices classified by traditional rhetoric as antithesis, chiasmus, and so on. Such devices set up clear, strong contrasts between paired words, phrases, or entire sentences. Even if they do not displace altogether a looser, more spontaneous-seeming mode, they certainly impart to this book a note of deliberateness, formality and sheer artifice that commentators on his prose style have sometimes overlooked or denied. Discussing the fear of death, for example, Defoe says, 'It is not what we pass out of, that is the bitterness, but what we pass into; not what we part with, but what the Exchange will be; not the leap out of Light, but the leap into the Dark' (p. 174).[27] The structural balance and firmness of such sentences often gains considerable force through compression; the pithy, aphoristic utterances that result can be quite powerful. One chapter begins, 'DANGER may be the Reason of Caution; but Guilt only is the Reason of Fear. Caution is the Mind's just Regard to the Evil in view; but Fear is a Horror of the Soul, in apprehension of some farther Evil yet out of view; unseen, and therefore terrible; merited, and therefore dreadful' (p. 174). Another chapter starts, 'THERE may be Dreams without Apparition, as there may be Apparitions without Dreams' (p. 181). Often Defoe's formulations have the laconic vigour of proverbs: 'As is the Errand, such is the Messenger; as is the Work, such is the Labourer' (p. 251); 'They that *do* Good, demonstrate in the best manner that they *are* good' (p. 79); 'Friends lost are Friends lost' (p. 187). On the subject of the non-return of souls, the logic of the following propositions may be questionable, but their crispness and verve are striking: 'It is plain to me, and will pass for Evidence, that they cannot, because they do not; and 'tis plain to me that some do not, because all do not; for if any, why not all?' (p. 126). Examples could be multiplied, in which highly patterned, highly economical prose belies the image of Defoe as a rambling, garrulous, play-it-by-ear cobbler of aimless and interminable sentences.

I have suggested that the prose of the *History and Reality of Apparitions* contains a good deal of balanced, antithetical patterning; it is also full of figures of speech. Defoe piques himself on writing plainly, and he writes very metaphorically. This is sometimes regarded as paradoxical, perhaps owing to Bishop Sprat's famous proscription of metaphor, which seems to

[27] For a similar series of parallel constructions, cf. p. 72: 'We must talk politely, not religiously; we may show the Scholar, but must not show a Word of the Christian; so we may quote prophane History, but not sacred; and a Story out of *Lucan* or *Plutarch*, *Tully*, or *Virgil* will go down, but not a Word out of *Moses* or *Joshua*'.

have weighed less heavily on writers of Defoe's generation (or Sprat himself) than on modern critics. As Defoe remarks, 'We can Form no Idea of any Thing that we know not and have not seen, but in the Form of something that we have seen':[28] thus we can describe unfamiliar things only in terms of what is already familiar, through processes that are essentially metaphorical. In a work devoted to the strange denizens and occurrences of an invisible world, he is obliged to rely heavily on such techniques; yet the role of metaphor exceeds the requirements of unfamiliar subject matter, and reflects Defoe's partiality to bold analogy, whether as a means of strengthening arguments or for the sheer love of forcibly yoking unlike things together, sometimes called wit.

Here, for example, is the conclusion of a paragraph on the potency of a guilty conscience: Defoe calls it a drummer in the soul 'that can beat an Allarm when he pleases, and so loud, as no other Noise can drown it, no Musick quiet it or make it hush, no Power silence it, no Mirth allay it, no Bribe corrupt it' (p. 112). In this extended conceit the juxtaposed terms change as rapidly as in Defoe's youthful 'Meditations' (1681): an initial personification of conscience as drummer shifts to images of the unquenchable loudness of the drumming itself, which in turn give way to tropes for its psychological or social imperviousness, to 'Mirth' or 'Bribe'. Another long simile about a guilty conscience has the same quality, reflecting in its agitated form the tumultuousness it describes: for two 'restless and raging' paragraphs Defoe rings the changes on the proposition that 'the Soul of the Murtherer is like the Ocean in a Tempest', with the conscience likened at first to the sea itself, then to a vessel threatened and shipwrecked by the storm (pp. 115–16). He has telling similes for various states of anxiety and alarm; thus a man in fearful uncertainty 'is like one of those poor People where they are in an Earthquake, they see the Buildings totter and fall before them, and tho' they are not bury'd in the Ruins, but are perhaps escap'd out into the Fields; yet they feel the Earth roll and move under them, and they are doubtful and apprehensive lest they may be swallowed up every Moment' (p. 256). In many such passages, what is striking is not only the aptness of the comparison, but the inclusion of graphic detail that is theoretically redundant but imaginatively persuasive, as when he says, to illustrate the unreasonableness of a thoughtless calm regarding a future state, 'suppose … a Man in the upper Rooms of a House, when all the lower Part was on Fire; the Stair-case and all Retreats cut off, except throwing himself out of the Window, if this Man sat smoking his Pipe, or singing a Song, or reading a Play, would not you say he was demented and mad?' (p. 262).

[28] See 'A Vision of the Angelick World' in *Serious Reflections*, p. 46.

Ever since Benjamin Franklin praised the lifelikeness of Defoe's dramatic dialogues, readers have seen these passages as high points in the fictional works, and they stand out even more boldly in didactic books like *The Family Instructor* and *Religious Courtship*, and in late writings like *A New Family Instructor* and the present book. Elsewhere Defoe maintains that 'it is one great Advantage of writing in Dialogue, that the Author can put his own Sentiments into other People's Mouths. This Method has been practiced by several with good Success, and is sufficiently authorized by Cicero, and others of the Ancients.'[29] In other works he managed through versions of dialogue to present opposing views on some of the subjects treated in this one.[30] Here, however, dialogue tends to be used to develop and intensify dramatic situations, rather than to express competing theories about the reality of apparitions, or to articulate more than one position on other disputed issues. More generally, dialogue helps to make meaningful in human terms Defoe's surrounding discussions of rather abstruse, speculative matters. The invisible world thrusts itself abruptly into the lives of very down-to-earth mortals: this results in a series of brief but emotionally charged novellas, in which strong-willed people find themselves constrained or thwarted by uncanny visitants and at cross purposes with one another. They react to uncertainty with a mixture of anxiety and aggression that associates them with some of Defoe's better-known fictional characters, and it is through their energetic dialogue (rather than their supernaturally curtailed or encumbered actions) that they come to life.

The best of these narratives are presented largely as reported speech.[31] They come brilliantly to life as self-contained episodes; nor are they simple dialogues, but playlets with multiple actors. In one (pp. 198–210),

[29] See *The Commentator* (19 February 1720).

[30] For debates over a doctrine that Defoe upholds but recognises as controversial – that Providence gives us 'Notices' of approaching danger, which prudence and piety oblige us to heed – see the references in Explanatory Notes, note 283, below, pp. 347–8.

[31] Although Defoe's narrative gifts emerge most impressively when he is representing actual conversation, the vocabulary of the spoken language varies and invigorates all his prose. Throughout this book he revels in vivid vernacular English. Many specimens spring from his interest in regional or folk usages; thus he refers to 'what our People vulgarly call *Walking*'; to what is 'vulgarly call'd by us a Ghost, by our Northern People a *Ghest*'; to 'a *Pether*, so the old *English* calls him, that is a *Pedlar*', and so on (pp. 53, 78, 303). He knows and uses the distinctive idioms of occupations such as seafaring; thus he reports that a captain 'turn'd in (as they call it at Sea) that is, went to Bed', and that a ship almost ran '*Bump a-shore* (so the Sailors call it)' (pp. 189, 190). On almost every page there are colloquialisms, e.g. the Devil 'worry'd [Job], to use a modern Phrase, *within an Inch of his Life*' (p. 183); there are energetic gerundials and participials such as 'go a mobbing', 'brisking up to him', and 'rabballing' (pp. 73, 176, 183); and colourful expressions like 'if he gave her *the Lie* again she would spit in his Face' (p. 141).

slightly reminiscent of the Colchester episode early in *Moll Flanders*, a young lady is courted by two brothers, the elder wanting her as his mistress, the younger as his wife. Like Moll, she happens to love the elder, but the focus here is not at all on her but on the struggle between the brothers, who nearly duel over her and are prevented only by the apparition to each of them of their old father, at a time when he is bedridden sixty miles away. As in his conduct manuals, Defoe captures well the explosive rivalry between siblings, but the most remarkable feature of this episode is the transformation of anger into 'Terror and Confusion' as the father appears to each brother, disarms their violence by turning it against himself, and thus brings about their reconciliation. The story is presented within eighteen pages, of which barely four are authorial narrative and stage directions; the rest is entirely speech between the two young men and their father and their servants. Hostility among sharp-tongued, inflammable family members is for Defoe a boundless, never-failing subject, to which he always does justice; more unusual but equally effective in this story is the astonishment and bewilderment of the young men over their father's sudden and mysterious intervention. Although harmony between them is ultimately restored, the young men's prior sensations of being in the dark and out of control are at the heart of the drama, and these are conveyed with great skill and economy.

Similar tensions and frustrations mark another skilfully staged episode (pp. 133–46), in which a young woman who has been keeping company with a young man, but has not yet 'yielded to his Importunities for a criminal Conversation', agrees to meet him at the farmhouse of one of his tenants, but is prevented from keeping the assignation by the minister of the town, who meets and sternly reproves her as she approaches her undoing. The bulk of the story involves her subsequent misunderstandings and conflicts with her disappointed would-be lover: these arise from the fact that it is a kindly apparition who has thwarted their 'wicked Purposes', not the minister himself, who had been in London at the time, and unwittingly causes trouble between the man and woman by denying his presence on the occasion. The woman is 'terribly surprized', and overcome with 'Horror', 'Shame' and 'Confusion' by her confrontation with the minister, but this is because he knows and condemns her guilty intentions, not because she has any inkling that he is an apparition. Again there is the drama of bafflement, frustration and ill will verging on violence; yet these are the responses of flesh-and-blood people to one another, not to an encounter with someone from the invisible world. Such a visitant is pivotal to the action, however, preventing an initial mischief (the criminal conversation) but precipitating subsequent mischief (the contretemps between

man and woman). The latter aspect of the episode oscillates effectively between affection and bitterness, decorum and wildness, all through the medium of dialogue; and Defoe acknowledges its generic framework when he says in passing that if he had pursued the story further 'it would make two Acts of a good Comedy' (p. 136).

A third story, consisting largely of dialogue, deals with the same set of emotions, but in a familial setting from which all affection has been drained (pp. 148–57). A man's grown son by his first marriage has been abroad and not heard from for several years; the second wife, arguing that the son must have died, tries to make her husband disinherit the lost son in favour of her own eldest son. The father believes the son may still be alive, but his resistance to her nagging importunity weakens, and he is saved from signing the fatal document only by the son's momentary apparition at a window, which terrifies the wife. Soon recovering from her fright, she renews the campaign by threatening to prosecute or publicly expose her husband for dealing with the devil or a familiar spirit, and nearly prevails; again an apparition of the son at a window, 'staring directly at the Woman with a stern and angry Countenance' and commanding her to 'HOLD', causes the evil scheme to be dropped. In this story the supernatural agent is immediately recognised as such, causes the guilty percipient great distress, and is responsible for the desired outcome; yet the bulk of the story chronicles the wife's constant badgering and the husband's resentful wavering during a drawn-out domestic nightmare. The eventual arrival of the long-absent son could have provided a dramatic denouement to a different kind of story; here what matters most is that the wicked stepmother be foiled and punished. This is done better by the apparitional than by the living son, whose actual return is mentioned more as a sequel to the story than a part of it.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, it would be a mistake to minimise the importance of the hero's 'strange surprizing adventures', since they clearly do possess novelty, excitement, suspense and other attractions; yet it can be argued that Crusoe's response to his ordeal – how he bears up and adapts and masters and makes sense of it – is ultimately as vital to the book as his overt vicissitudes. By the same token, *A Journal of the Plague Year* is full of inherently sensational subject matter, but the heart of the book, one can maintain, is as much H. F.'s effort to grasp and comprehend the plague as the plague itself. I do not wish to undervalue the strangeness or surprise of the supernatural adventures in the *Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*: for Defoe to have made this material so lifelike and believable was a remarkable achievement. Yet their most remarkable feature, I have tried

to suggest, although perhaps a somewhat paradoxical one, is not the intrusion of supernatural agents into human affairs, but rather Defoe's dramatisation of the responses of ordinary people to extraordinary goings-on. Each story turns on an apparition becoming one of the dramatis personae and having a decisive influence on the narrative outcome. Nevertheless the deepest interest of author and reader alike is in what people think and feel in such circumstances, and dialogue is Defoe's main means of probing and revealing this.

Within these stories, characters try to do for themselves what Defoe is doing in the book as a whole: they have the challenge of coming to terms with experiences that their ordinary habits of mind cannot encompass. They are thus actors, but just as importantly interpreters, in a variety of dramas. Many of these episodes, particularly the shorter ones, Defoe has evidently selected for their emblematic function, because he believes they bear out one or another point he wants to make about the source, nature, or significance of a given kind of event. Certain other episodes, including some of the longest and best, resist or exceed their illustrative roles, and it is at these moments – when explanation is omitted, or falls short, or doesn't quite fit – that an element of the marvellous withstands the considerable resources of characters and author alike to explain it.

All the same, Defoe's most characteristic explanations of the marvellous do not explain it away. By accounting for the majority of purportedly supernatural occurrences in natural terms, and by showing that one need not hold devils, angels, ghosts or spirits responsible for the products of guilty conscience, distempered fancy and priestly fraud, Defoe is (in modern terms) simply being rational; if the analysis is depreciatory, this seems entirely appropriate. There is nothing reductive, however, in his treatment of the matters that concern him most. They do take place, he acknowledges, within the human mind, but they do not, he believes, originate there: 'Dreams, Trances, Visions, Noises, Voices, Hints, Impulses' are all 'Testimonies of an invisible World'[32] and come from there, sent by spirits benevolently attentive to our welfare. For such phenomena, to which he attaches great practical value as well as metaphysical significance, he provides an elaborate but distinctly non-naturalistic etiology. If the *History* of the supernatural is thus diminished, through Defoe's satiric relegation of its traditional content to the marginal genres of old wives' tales and chimney-corner stories, the ultimate effect of the book is nevertheless to assert its *Reality*, but along lines very much of Defoe's own choosing. By shifting

[32] See 'A Vision of the Angelick World', p. 24.

the critical nexus of dealings with the invisible world to dreams, impulses and 'silent Converse' (p. 44), Defoe lessens the centrality of his ostensible subject, apparitions. Although their history remains the main subject of the book's narratives, both satiric and non-satiric, the primacy of narrative itself is challenged by Defoe's own fascinating and wide-ranging commentary on behaviour and belief.

Original frontispiece[1] to the 1727 edition. All plates by permission of the British Library.