

The Breakdown of Apparitional Exemplarity from Defoe to Richardson

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Critics have frequently described the eighteenth-century novel as an enlightenment genre in which the supernatural and the miraculous give way to a new focus upon everyday objects and ordinary people. Yet at the very early stages of the English novel, Daniel Defoe peopled his *Robinson Crusoe* with supernatural beings whom Crusoe believed were attempting to contact him. Crusoe makes specific decisions at important junctures in the novel based on their promptings and the positive results of these decisions suggests that the logic of the plot supports spiritual agents too. Crusoe's interpretive efforts were thus an accessible example of supernatural interactions in modern-day life, something for readers to emulate. The representation of such naturalized spirits was not widely adopted however and, by mid-century, Samuel Richardson was already deemphasizing the representation of spiritual interactions, even as he desired to retain God's agency in his texts' story worlds. Belief in spirits persisted, but they could no longer stand in as evidence for God's involvement in the world.

Defoe's spirits provide evidence of God's care for mankind through the continuing mediation of benevolent invisible agents. They perform the same function spiritually as material second causes do physically: that is, they are normal occurrences which serve a divine purpose without requiring God's miraculous appearance in the mundane world. Providence can provide for Crusoe by allowing English barley seeds to survive a shipwreck and sprout on a tropical island against all odds. But providence can also provide for Crusoe by commissioning spiritual beings who send premonitions which suggest he walk one way rather than another, thereby helping him avoid a party of headhunters. The supernatural impinging upon human faculties becomes quite natural; the only stumbling block is that people may not know how to read the communications. Crusoe's careful parsing of hints and premonitions was therefore an example to be followed, because the supernatural did not operate through extraordinary means. It was part of the fabric of everyday life, accessible to everyone.

By the time of Richardson's novel-writing, however, such examples no longer seem feasible. A cadre of authors with whom Richardson was in close contact, from George Cheyne to the graveyard poets he printed, had strongly affirmed the existence of spirits while also disclaiming the possibility of representing them literally. Whether the discourse was Cheyne's philosophical musings or James Hervey's nocturnal meditations, spirits were defined as powerful beings which had no place in mimesis. Spirits simply did not figure, even if they were pulling strings from behind the curtain, because the author had to attend to more important matters, abstracting the mind from earthly living and second causes in order to better concentrate on the first cause, God. Apparitions were thus in a sense occulted without being effaced.

Richardson too participated in this mode of representation, especially in *Clarissa*, working to detach his heroine's thoughts from second causes in order that she might achieve a closer relationship with God. Of course Clarissa herself is both example to be followed and exemplar who is impossible to match. Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that one potential apparition does escape into the world of the novel at Lovelace's deathbed: "several times [he] cried out, as if he had seen some frightful spectre, Take her away! Take her away!" The plot to this point had seemed to militate against a belief in an active supernatural realm—if, for example, God was just, why could he not send supernatural aid to forestall Clarissa's rape? But Lovelace's excessive cruelty, sinning against his better promptings like one sinning against the Holy Ghost, was apparently extreme enough to merit a terrifying vision, potentially a supernatural one, and in any case, an example that the reader

should shun for his life. The invisible world was still active and powerful—seemingly able to execute God’s judgment at last—but when it came to virtue and personal danger, Richardson intimates that one had better focus on personal effort than benevolent spiritual agents.

Spirits could no longer be relied upon as an apologetics tool, as God’s magical genie to help one out of scrapes. Nor could they be written off without damaging religion. The juxtaposition of De-foe’s and Richardson’s approach to middling spirits suggests that the English novel from the start was concerned with representing the supernatural, but that examples of supernatural interaction could not be sustained; not in the realistic mode, anyway. Apparitions were therefore occulted without being effaced. Only when all possible literal belief in active spirits had been drained from the text could apparitions return to full representational force, with the rise of the Gothic. By that time, spiritual intervention was no longer treated as a hypothetical-thought-unlikely possibility, but as a contrary-to-fact subjunctive which the reader was expected to accept on poetic faith in order to access the aesthetic experience of the text.