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Scientific Rationalism and Supernatural Experience Narratives

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We’ve all been there. You’re sitting around with friends sharing a few stories, when the topic turns to the supernatural. Someone tells a ghost story they heard while camping many years earlier. A second person tells a story about a neighbourhood house that is reputed to be haunted. Eventually and almost inevitably, someone tells a story about a ghost that happened to her.

This is not, according to some academics, as it should be. The spontaneous telling of a personal supernatural experience runs counter to one of the central principles of academic rationalist traditions—that supernatural belief would decline as education and technology increased. This chapter will address the climate of scholarly opinion that has surrounded academic discussions of modern rationalism and popular belief and will then move on to examine the role and construction of reasoning in narratives of supernatural belief and experience.

Cultural Evolution and Modern Scientific Rationalism

The conventional academic point of view that supernatural beliefs are survivals from a naive past and must decline as scientific thought ascends is itself quite old, steeped in the rationalist perspectives of David Hume and other eighteenth-century European philosophers who attributed religion to primitive thinking processes and declared that as individuals and societies
acquired a more rational understanding of the world, religion would be displaced, initially by philosophy but ultimately by science. The philosophers who repeatedly linked religion and “irrational” thought processes of “primitive” peoples shared a thinly veiled agenda, responding to what they perceived as religious superstitiousness and the oppressive structures of Europe’s Roman Catholic Church (Hayden 1987, 590). Nevertheless, this rationalist context heavily influenced the evolutionary perspectives of early antiquarian folklore collectors.

In the context of this evolutionary philosophy, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antiquarians pursued the collecting of popular belief with a sense of urgency, convinced that failure to collect and preserve belief traditions would mean that they would disappear without documentation. These “survivals” were understood by antiquarian scholars as remnants of ideas that would no longer have currency in academic or “educated” portions of society. Nineteenth-century writings on folklore were full of references to evolutionary ideas, if not explicitly to evolutionary theory. Fletcher Bassett, for example, writing in 1885 about ghost ships\(^1\) noted:

> The old type of sailor, who believed in the mermaid, the sea-snake, and the phantom ship, is fast disappearing, and with the gradual substitution of the steamship for the sailing vessel, he is replaced by the mechanical seaman, who sees no spectre in the fog, nor sign of disaster in the air, or beneath the wave. ([1885] reprint 1971, 8)

Bassett assumed, as did his contemporaries, an image of the noble but naive fisherman intent on explaining the sights and sounds of the elements by leaping to supernatural conclusions. His son Wilber Bassett, also a maritime folklorist, was even more explicit thirty years later, although somewhat more sympathetic in writing about the tendency of seafaring men to turn to supernatural explanations. He wrote that

> sight and sound alow and aloft are to the sailor as trail and track to the woodsman, eloquent of meaning. His
perception in times of calm or storm is open wide to the slightest sound or sight that might foretell coming change. To this consciousness cloud and mist shapes, mirages, and the thousand sights and sounds of the ever shifting panorama brings many extraordinary and inexplicable things, which are stored away in memory, and their expression in the tenacity with which sailors cling to their belief in the “supernatural.” ([1917] 1974, 81)

Both Fletcher and Wilbur Bassett understood the phantom ship phenomenon as the product of an unequivocal acceptance of the supernatural combined with the interpretation of standard sea hallucinations by an unscientific and uncritical mind. This characterization of the delusional fisherman who sees skeletons of the dead in flowing shrouds wandering around or chained to the decks of flaming ghostly vessels predominates even in the modern literature on ghost ship traditions. Margaret Baker in 1979 wrote that

usually ship-phantoms rise from storm and wreck and, glowing with light, decks rotted, crews skeletal, helms untended, they approach, silently on collision courses from which with diabolical cunning they swing away, leaving shaken crews to marvel that they lived. (53)

Baker’s resort to literary clichés is the contemporary and more respectful (but no less infused with evolutionary theory) version of the delusional uncritical fisherman. This image of the fisherman who sees ghouls and ghosts of horror films and jumps to supernatural conclusions at the drop of a hat naturally forces the prediction that education will quiet the overimaginative mind and untrained eye of these primitive men of the sea.

While it is not just the fisherman who was associated with irrational supernatural thought, the occupation and seafaring context fit nicely with other central perspectives of evolutionary theory—that cultural survivals would “trickle down” from elite to lower levels of society; to the undereducated and underemployed, the poor, the ethnic or cultural “other,” and the geographically
isolated (Mullen 2000, 122). Indicative of that point of view, Newbell Niles Puckett wrote in 1931 that folk beliefs “are found mainly with the uncultured and backward classes of society, white or coloured; and it is to such retarded classes rather than to either racial group as a whole that reference is made . . . ” (9).

Baker’s references to the delusional fisherman is a group-specific manifestation of wider evolutionary thought found even more subtly in the writings of many of the most prominent belief scholars of the twenty-first century. Anthropologist Anthony Wallace argued in 1966, for example, that “belief in supernatural beings and in supernatural forces that affect nature without obeying nature’s laws will erode and become only an interesting historical memory . . . ” (264), and similarly, historian Keith Thomas noted in 1991 that in contrast to the past, belief in ghosts is now “rightly distained by intelligent persons” (ix).

The legacy of evolutionary theory in the field of belief studies has been significant and continues to reify stereotypical views of both supernatural traditions and those who hold folk beliefs. Bonnie O’Connor argues that cultural evolutionism as a theory of culture is now generally academically discredited on grounds of oversimplification and worse of parentalism and ethnocentric bias. Nevertheless this intellectual history has left a pervasive and often damaging legacy. Folk belief has continued to be implicitly or explicitly defined as that body of belief and knowledge which is contradicted or superseded by modern or scientific knowledge. This presumption in turn has conditioned approaches taken to the subject, as would be expected of any subject defined at the outset by its investigators as “incorrect.” Evolutionist and survivalist assumptions about culture, cultural processes, and belief and knowledge have until very recently focussed the attention of scholars of folk belief almost exclusively on non-dominant groups, defined by virtue of their social position and different from the dominant culture as “the folk.” (1995, 38)
Also tracing the more subtle consequences of cultural evolutionism and scientific rationalism on the study of belief, Gillian Bennett notes that

of all types of folklore this is the one that seems least respectable and least believable in the so-called scientific age. The main trouble for folklorists is that we have got ourselves into not one, but no less than three vicious circles. Firstly no one will tackle the subject because it is disreputable, and it remains disreputable because no one will tackle it. Secondly, because no one does any research into present day supernatural beliefs, occult traditions are generally represented by old legends about fairies, bogeys and grey ladies. Furthermore, because published collections of supernatural folklore are thus stuck forever in a time warp, folklorists are rightly wary of printing the modern beliefs they do come across for fear of offending their informants by appearing to put deeply felt beliefs on a par with chain-rattling skeletons and other such absurdities. Thirdly, because no one will talk about their experiences of the supernatural there is no evidence for it and because there is no evidence for it no one talks about their experiences of it. (1987, 13)

Bennett’s comments point out clearly the materialistic or rationalistic approach in the social sciences that has created a notion of supernatural belief as antithetical to modern thought and therefore destined for imminent demise. The usual expectation among North American intellectuals is that anyone who believes in “science” will not believe in such phenomena as ghosts, spirits, or witches. In fact the first paragraph of Garvin McCain and Erwin Segal’s The Game of Science begins with the claim that we no longer believe in witches precisely because we believe in science:

Why don’t you believe in witches? That question may seem ridiculous but our ancestors, who were probably as bright as we are, did believe in them, and acted accordingly. Why
are we so different and superior? The evidence for or against witches is no better than it was 400 years ago. For us, it is almost impossible to believe in witches; for our ancestors, it was equally difficult to deny their existence. Our new beliefs exist, in part, due to the development of "scientific attitudes." (1969, 3)

What do we make then, of the friend described earlier who tells the ghost narrative as if it were her own personal experience?

A Dying Tradition, or Is It?

Since the 1970s, a few social scientists have administered surveys to assess the actual state of contemporary belief in the supernatural. Sociologist, author, and priest Andrew Greeley surveyed claims of communication with the dead, clairvoyance, and mystical experience in 1973 and found that almost one-fifth of the American population reported frequent supernatural experiences (Greeley 1975). A few years later, a study by a team from the sociology department at Leeds University in England found that 14 percent of their sizable sample from the United Kingdom believed in astrology, 35 percent in fortune telling, 36 percent in ghosts, 54 percent in clairvoyance, and 61 percent in telepathy (Kakrup 1982).

Public opinion polls reflect similar results. In 2003, the Harris Interactive Poll (which surveys American adults online) found that 89 percent of their sample believe in miracles, 68 percent believe in the devil, 69 percent believe in hell, 51 percent in ghosts, 31 percent in astrology, and 27 percent in reincarnation (Taylor 2003). Most recently, a poll by the Gallup Organization administered in 2005 showed that three in four Americans hold some belief in at least one of the paranormal areas surveyed by Gallup, which included extra-sensory perception (ESP), haunted houses, ghosts, mental telepathy, clairvoyance, astrology, communication with the dead, witches, reincarnation, and channeling. According to the Gallup Organization, who update their audits of these issues every couple of years, continual surveys have demonstrated slight increases in paranormal belief over
the last fifteen years with decline in belief in only one area since 1990, that of devil possession. According to the 2005 audit, over half of Americans believe in psychic or spiritual healing and ESP and more than a third believe in haunted houses, possession by the devil, ghosts, telepathy, extraterrestrial beings having visited the earth, and clairvoyance (Gallup Organization 2005).

The Canadian Leger Marketing Survey also found in 2005 that a majority of Canadians surveyed believed in angels and life after death while roughly one third reported a belief that aliens and ghosts existed. The polling firm also indicated that 6.3 percent of respondents reported that they had seen a ghost and 5.8 percent reported seeing an angel (FarShores ParaNews 2005b).

Not only is supernatural belief widespread in North America and the United Kingdom, but so much so that it might even be considered the norm. But what is even more significant in terms of rationalist and evolutionary theories is that supernatural belief was reported by a substantial part of the population from all classes and educational backgrounds. The findings of Greeley, the Leeds team, and the public opinion surveys indicate clearly that the extent of belief in the supernatural has for some time been seriously underestimated. Each of these studies includes remarks of astonishment on the part of the investigators, all pointing to one crucial question: “Why have we for so long overlooked the extent of contemporary belief in the supernatural?” So our friend who tells the ghost story is in good company, but is she (and her fellow believers) rational?

**The Rational Believer**

The materialistic or rationalistic approach in the social sciences has not only forced a notion of supernatural belief as antithetical to modern thought and therefore destined for imminent demise, but has also meant that we found only that for which we were looking: a world that had forsaken popular belief and replaced it with “rational thought.” While the formula itself (supernatural belief ≠ rational, therefore modern/educated = no supernatural belief) was apparently wrong and misleading,
the central fallacy on which it is based—that supernatural belief and rational thought are dichotomous—was perhaps the most problematic premise.

When folklorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists have looked seriously at the area of contemporary belief, it has largely been through several variations on a single perspective. Central to this perspective is the question, “How can beliefs that are so clearly false still be held to be true?” (Hufford 1982a). Traditionally this question has led to explanation in terms of the historical origins of belief traditions or in terms of social utility. As O’Connor notes, “Such theoretical orientations imply that the beliefs to whose analysis they are applied are false, and the actions those beliefs inform ‘really’ accomplish something other than what the actor intends and believes them to do” (1995, 44).

Recent phenomenological approaches to belief (Hufford 1982a, 1982b; Virtanen 1990; Bennett 1987, 1999; O’Connor 1995) have, however, opposed traditional academic assumptions that supernatural belief traditions necessarily arise from various kinds of error. These studies demonstrate that careful analysis of belief traditions reveal reasoned consideration and the testing of alternatives on the part of percipients and narrators. As David Hufford has noted, “We should be collecting not only supernatural beliefs and narratives . . . but also people’s reasons for holding those beliefs so that we may inductively describe their empirical and logical components” (Hufford 1982b, 54). Though the collection of explicit reasons for holding beliefs is indeed an important task, a close look at the structure of personal supernatural experience narratives suggests that many of those reasons are built into the narratives themselves and are a regular part of the narrating process.

Staying with our earlier theme of the scholar’s imagined delusional fisherman who sees flaming ships and skeletons of the dead chained to rotting decks, consider (for example) the following actual narrative told by a Newfoundland man who believes he encountered a phantom ship while out fishing in the family schooner.
On the night of October second (year about 1930) we left Seldom Come by about four o’clock in the morning and came on up around Cape Freels. It was a nice fine day but when we were half way across Bonavista Bay the wind died out completely. We waited about two hours and then Father decided to get the motor boat cut off the deck and tow the schooner. We towed then until about seven p.m. from two in the afternoon and by seven o’clock in the night the wind was up enough to put some sail on and get underway again. We were across the bay and heading around Cape Bonavista and toward Catalina by nine o’clock. Then we noticed a ship about a mile astern. I was on watch at the wheel. She kept gaining on us and when she got up about broadside and off a couple of gunshots she turned and started to head in towards Catalina. We could see the lights of Catalina by this time. Father thought it must be the “Prospero.” She was a coastal vessel. But when he said that, we saw her turn and head away from Catalina and on up the bay again. Father then figured it was a fish steamer headed up to Ryans (a prospering fish plant in Trinity Bay). She kind of faded away and we forgot about it since we were anxious to get home and all. We only did see her lights, mast head light, running lights, port and starboard, and a few porthole lights, as she caught up to us and passed us. When I think about it now, I don’t know if the lights were very clear or not. Strikes me they were a bit fuzzy or glimmering. Anyhow, we forgot about her when she faded in the distance. I was still at the wheel since my watch went on till midnight and about 11:30 it came on a living gale. Uncle Don took over at twelve o’clock and he stayed lashed to the wheel all night until daylight because we couldn’t get a man aft to relieve him cause she was shipping too much water. The skipper started to haul the canvas off of her and in an hour we were down to mainsail and jumbo.
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About twelve-thirty someone spotted her (the phantom) again for a few minutes. We could see the lights for a bit and then they turned sideways and disappeared. We figures she had gone round Horse Chops and was beating on in to Trinity. For about six hours, until daylight, there was a terrific storm. Father said after it was the worst one he was ever out in and he had been out in a good many. We had all sails off except the foresail, and just could keep her to the wind. By daylight we had been blown right over on the South side of Trinity Bay down somewhere off Heart’s Content near as we could figure. Anyhow come daylight we squared away and eventually got in around Bonavista Head and on in to Trinity. When we got in Uncle Baxter came on board and he said to father, “Where did ye come from Ken?” Father said that we had been out on the bay all night. “Couldn’t have,” says Uncle Baxter, “cause nothin’ could live out there last night.” “We were then,” said Father, “because we were right off the Bite when that steamer come in here to Ryan’s.” “Haven’t been a steamer into Ryan’s in three days,” said Uncle Baxter, “and no vessel came in here last night.” So we figured that it must have been the phantom ship, and when she headed in toward Catalina about nine o’clock that must have been a sign for us to head in there too. If we had we wouldn’t have been out in the storm at all. It sure did blow from the South East too and that’s what they say always happens. (MUNFLA 63–DIT, 100–103)

The melodramatic phantom described by Baker is not present in this narrative and neither is the unscientific and uncritical narrator suggested by Fletcher and Wilbur Bassett. Instead, we find a careful and highly detailed narrative that foregrounds the skills and tools of a sailor: navigational aids, wind directions and changes, sail positions, dates, times, landmarks, and nautical distances. There are no skeletal crews here or rotting decks, but instead a series of sophisticated observations noting a vessel that never arrived at its only possible destination. One would
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indeed be hard pressed to call this narrative irrational. But is the story told by our friend at the beginning of this chapter likely to be as rational?

**The Narrative Witness Stand**

Narrative tellings are always shaped and reshaped by the narrator’s skill, context, audience, topical links, and many other factors and are therefore always varied and emergent. Supernatural experience narratives, on the other hand, tend to share a common highly detailed, cautious, and sometimes even defensive structure. The sea phantom narrative given above is, in this sense, not alone in its cautiousness, but rather reflects a structure that is common to contemporary supernatural experience narratives. These narratives, or memorates as they are called, are typically told as though one were on the witness stand, detailed and careful, incorporating numerous strategies that outline the nature of the observations, the testing of alternative explanations, and often including an indication of reluctance to interpret what occurred as “supernatural.” One ghost enthusiast blog published on the Internet made the following similar observation:

This weekend some friends and I got to talking about ghost stories. I asked if any of the tales being told were real experiences. Some were hearsay from family and friends, some were campfire tales, and others were urban legends. Then I asked if any of the group had personal experiences with ghosts. One brave soul admitted to what seemed like a ghostly encounter. Once that adventure had been recounted, others began to fess up.

Something occurred to me during that session. There is a difference between “ghost stories” and “haunted encounters.” Ghost stories are just that—stories. Each tale has a central character and follows the three-act structure. Haunted encounters don’t usually have a beginning, middle and end. The personal experience narratives almost always start with a disclaimer and end with the narrator’s voice trailing off and another disclaimer. Ghost stories
are told with gusto and glee. Haunted encounters are told reluctantly and with apology. Ghost stories are thought to be entertaining and acceptable. Haunted encounters are often considered to be the delusions of a troubled mind. (Haunted Encounters Blog 2005)

Although there is of course no actual witness stand, narrators are conscious of the potential for being judged irrational and therefore assume a stance that anticipates contestation of observations and conclusions. The resulting narratives stand in opposition to the traditional academic assumption that supernatural belief traditions arise from various kinds of error, impaired reasoning, or poor observation on the part of believers or narrators. Instead each narrative embeds information on the accumulation and determination of evidential criteria directed at opening up the interpretation of the narrative events for discussion. The sense of evidence used here is not dissimilar from legal definitions. Bauvier’s Law Dictionary, for example, defines evidence as

that which tends to prove or disprove any matter in question or to influence the belief respecting it. Belief is produced by the consideration of something presented to the mind. The matter thus presented, in whatever shape it may come, and through whatever material organ it is derived, is evidence. (Bauvier 1914, 69)

A characteristic feature of the memorate is its structured narrative exploration of evidence. In this sense, not only is the narrative reasoned and logical but it appears to be largely about reasoning and logic. Consider, for example, the following narrative told by Francis, a native of St. John’s, Newfoundland, during an interview. Francis was forty-six when he related this memorate.

Well, the first one, I was on vigil, and if I had been the only one, well, I never knew it at the time. During Holy Week in the Catholic church somebody has to be on vigil. Vigil is watch, you see, all the time. It’s a re-enactment of the watching of the tomb for Christ. The night shift was from twelve o’clock to six. We didn’t mind. Then ah, it
was in St. Patrick’s Church, which is an old church. And this marvellous, beautiful nun came this way out, and was coming around the altar. And the only thing that was confusing me, was that everybody during Lent, especially during Holy Week, were around. And she didn’t speak to me, when I said “hello” to her. Now you kneel down on this, it’s sort of a kneeling chair with velvet padding for your knees and an armrest. And you don’t sit down, you kneel down. And then, she went around the altar, down the middle aisle, and came back again. And she walked around the area of the altar, which is quite large, to a big statue. She did the Stations of the Cross, and she came up, passed by me, just passed. And the church was, uh, there was a different odor. It was nice and uh, not any odor that I’m familiar with. I guess it would be sort of an odor like, if you lived in the jungles of Africa and you smelled a lilac. It would be a different odor. Well, it was something I never smelled before, and never smelled after. When she got about five feet in front of me, she disappeared. And I got a bit of a shock, but then it went away again immediately. I was about eleven. But afterwards, I found out that this nun had been seen for years and years. And if I hadn’t known that up to this time, I probably would have said that it was my imagination. But I never knew it, that other people had seen her. And I mentioned it to the priest and he said, “Yes, you’re not the first one, we know who it is, and it’s probably something she was supposed to do, and did not do.” “Because,” he said, ”you said she did the Stations of the Cross.” “She must not have done something. She was supposed to do the Stations of the Cross, probably. For some old lady or something and didn’t. Forgot to do it. [Didn’t have] . . . time to do it and is atoning for it.” And there are many people who can back that story up.

Like the phantom ship narrative recounted earlier, Francis’s account is full of descriptive information. The extraordinary
amount of detail characteristic of supernatural experience narratives has been noted over the years by several scholars, but most notably by Lauri Honko. In his article on the memorate written in 1964, Honko noted that “there are memorates in which there are ample individual, unique features, and in certain respects, unnecessary details” (Honko 1964, 11). Clearly, at many levels, Francis’s narrative recounts details that do not seem to advance the narrative action. Yet if we for a moment posit the notion that what appears “unnecessary” to the analyst may be central to the narrator and shift our notion of “where the action is,” we may begin to see a different picture. If we allow Francis to include in his narrative not only what took place, but his feelings and decisions, reactions, associations, and conclusions, we begin to see a narrative that can carry us through Francis’s thinking and reasoning processes.

By selecting and foregrounding relevant information, contexts, and scenes, Francis shows us how he began to form a meaningful whole from each of the events imparted in his narrative. He tells us that everyone was around for Holy Week and that he did not recognize this nun—a first clue that there was something unusual taking place. Then he spoke to her and she didn’t respond—another sign of unusual behavior. Francis begins to define the event by the absence of the expected. He follows the nun’s motions, mentions her odor, and then suddenly we find ourselves in the jungles of Africa smelling lilacs. It is not that Africa or the smell of lilacs has anything to do with the narrative events, but rather that the parallel situation explicates the newness of the experience. By analogic reasoning Francis clarifies not simply the events at hand, but his experience of those events. By bringing elements of his experience to bear on the case, Francis reveals for us what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have called his “relevance structures” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 45). In other words, he presents the manner in which he constructed his interpretation.

What might to some seem “unnecessary” in this narrative are the lengthy descriptions of the church, particularly of the kneeling chair. These aspects of the narrative are unchanging; they
remain a part of the everyday, unaffected by the narrative events. Yet the fact that these elements remain the same may be the very reason for their presence in the narrative. By contrasting the simple and the supernatural, Francis demonstrates his ability to distinguish one class from another. He is able to describe the familiar and thus define the characteristics of the unfamiliar. The reasoning is dialectical; the supernatural is seen in contrast to the natural. In this attempt at contrast and differentiation, the key is to separate the changing features. Thus, by carefully following the motions of the nun, Francis is able to investigate and demonstrate the relationship of the actor to her actions. It is not what she does that is unusual but rather her way of doing it.

Hufford has noted that the standard accusation of inadequate observation and reality-testing on the part of percipients is often countered in interview responses by references to specific testing strategies (Hufford 1982b, xviii). These strategies range beyond the proverbial “pinch to see if I was dreaming” to references to actual experimentation. Such references appear often in Francis’s narratives and are indicative of his desire to scientifically explain his experiences. In a different memorate, Francis related another experience he once had.

I’ll tell you something, my first real fright. We had a summer home around the bay, but we lived here in St. John’s. And I was fourteen, and I was the only one at home, and I had a set of encyclopaedias. Now you have to remember, all the doors are closed. And I’m asleep, very sound asleep. I wake up. And from the bedroom all the way out the hallway, and on each step going downstairs, for about eight feet, there, the books had run out. And my total set of encyclopaedias is open, to page 39, 40, 40, and 41. You know, I tried it after. Just to place a book, a hardcover book on the floor, and open it to any particular page, and let it stay there. It’s impossible. But these things, they’re all about a foot apart, systematically laid out. So I immediately, when I saw that, I just got out. For some strange reason, I just got a fright. Then I waited till my aunt, who
was out shopping down the street, came home. I went back in, and collected all the books. And, and she, she figured I did it for a joke, which I did not. But I wouldn’t tell her too much. I just said that I got a bit of a start. I never read anything out of them either. Thinking back, maybe I should have. What it meant, I don’t know.

In this narrative Francis recognizes duplication and replicability as standard scientific criteria. One third of the narrative is concerned with his attempt to replicate even a part of the event. He recognizes the implications for interpretation of the whole by explaining a part. Here the concern focuses on approximating the least sensational of the events, in the hope of illuminating what transpired.

Francis’s narratives are full of references to other witnesses and to himself and his own credibility. He begins and ends the first narrative with direct reference to others who have had the same experience. In so doing, he acknowledges the importance of precedent as evidence for his case. Rather than using the common narrative strategy of embedding several narratives into one story, he embeds narrators; that is, he fills his stories with others who have reported the same or similar events.

Francis recognizes the trustworthiness of numbers of witnesses, as well as specific characteristics of reliability. Among these, the sceptic appears to be the most credible. His narratives are filled with references to witnesses who were nonbelievers and, of particular importance, the priest. Although Francis’s narrative recounts his own experience of the events, he still classifies himself as less credible than other witnesses as is evidenced in his comment, “And if I hadn’t known that up to this time, I would have said it was probably my imagination.” Francis always gives full information concerning his age and mental state at the time of the narrative events. Further, he discriminates between full witnesses and circumstantial witnesses. In the second account, he notes that his aunt only saw the result of the events, and determines that this is not sufficient evidence to prove what transpired to an unsympathetic audience. Thus, the aunt is not given prominence as a witness.
Characteristic of much of the work done on memorates is the assumption that these narratives are heavily laden with the experiencer’s interpretation of the content and significance of, and reasons for, the experience (Cartwright 1982, 58). Francis’s ability to bracket these beliefs and interpretations is demonstrated in all of his supernatural experience narratives. In the first account given here, the notion that a ghost returns to resolve something that remained undone is only brought into the narrative as reported speech, thus setting it off as one interpretation. In the second narrative, Francis notes that the page numbers might have meant something, but suggests this only in his evaluation (Labov and Waletsky 1967, 12). Throughout the body of the narratives themselves, there are very few (if any) interpretive statements. This is true, to the extent that Francis never actually says what he thinks either phenomenon actually was. His tendency to discriminate between his beliefs and his accounts of experience can be seen in the conclusion to another of his narratives. In this story Francis has an unusual discussion on the street with an elderly man. He ended the narrative by saying

The man said, “I’ve got to go now,” and he walked into the graveyard on Waterford Bridge Road. He said, “Good night,” and vanished. And the night was moonlit, clear as a bell. And I was neither scared, oddly enough. Yet, if I go through a graveyard, I will whistle and cross both my fingers, to make sure I get across. Now, that’s a contradiction, isn’t it?

In this account Francis distinguishes between what he would call his “superstitions” and the actual personal experience.

Francis provides a useful case study here, but, as a retrospective look back at ghost ship narrative or a careful focus on other memorates will demonstrate, he is not alone in the way he structures his narratives. Consider, for example, the following randomly chosen ghost narrative from one of the many online ghost story archives:
Our room’s window and the mirror were haunted. It so happened that one day as I stood in front of it brushing my hair (long and straight) I experienced a strange thing. Half of the image was mine; the other half seemed to belong to somebody else. The mirror is rather distorted, so I thought it was an optical illusion. But as I noticed, the other image had short curly hair, white pupil-less slightly red eyes (mine are dark brown) and a beard. I was slightly confused and turned to look at the window right behind it; no one there. As I looked closely, I moved my head from side to side. On one side was my own image, but on the other side was something truly terrible. I screamed and ran out of the room to my mom. She comforted me and told me to come with her. I was afraid but went inside; as I peered in the mirror, there was no one in there. I dismissed the idea from my mind considering I was having hallucinations. The next day however, as I stood in front of the mirror, my whole image changed and that strange man leered at me. Again I ran out, convinced that it was not my imagination. At first mom was reluctant to believe, but after a few days our sweeper complained of a man following him around. He said, I can’t do my work properly with him around me; although he was alone speaking to my mom with no one around him. I began to see that man in every mirror or glass, even the ones on the cupboard. I was scared. In an attempt to end it we removed all the mirrors from the house but that man appeared in the cupboard glass; complete man in every one. I didn’t go there alone. (Castle of Spirits.com 2005)

Francis’s narrations demonstrate that evidential criteria are central in supernatural experience narratives, demonstrated through continual reference to relevance structures, detailing, case differentiation, the relationship of actor to action, duplication and replicability, and the assessment of credibility. The ghost in the mirror narrative uses the same strategies; the narrator provides
the ordinary/extraordinary contrast and case differentiation, tries experimentation to test replicability, explores the possibility of optical illusion, and cites other witnesses. Further, the embedding of evidence in Francis’s supernatural experience narratives, the incredibly careful detail in the phantom ship narrative, and the emphasis on replicability in the mirror narrative all appear rhetorically to be less about convincing an audience that the events took place and more about the narrator explaining how it was that he or she came to understand what happened, how it happened, and why it happened.

This exploration of embedded use of evidence is not intended to suggest the ontological reality of supernatural experience but rather to illustrate that these narratives are generally well-reasoned and more to the point, concerned with reason. In the narrative emphasis on evidence and rational belief, we can see that the personal supernatural experience narrative doesn’t exist in the face of modern scientific knowledge, but in content and structure it exists because of modern scientific knowledge.⁴