5. "Alas, Poor Ghost!"; Case Studies in the History of Ghosts and Visitations

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Chapter 5

“Alas, Poor Ghost!”

Case Studies in the History of Ghosts and Visitations

As Pierre Le Loyer wrote in the sixteenth century, the supernatural “is the topic that people most readily discuss and on which they linger the longest because of the abundance of the examples, the subject being fine and pleasing and the discussion the least tedious that can be found” (quoted by John Dover Wilson in his introduction to Lavater [1572] 1929). All the stories so far have been oral ones told in the context of interviews and conversations and taken to be representative of the beliefs of many people living today.

However, popular folklore and beliefs have from time to time been taken up by men of letters, or by the religious or secular authorities, and used for their own purposes. No book about ghosts and visitations can be complete without at least glancing at these angles. However, an adequate history of supernatural belief in literature, religion, and politics would take an immense labour (even Keith Thomas’s magisterial Religion and the Decline of Magic [1971] could only tackle developments over a limited period). So in this final chapter I claim to do no more than offer six snapshots that show individual moments in the flux of the intellectual traditions of writers and opinion leaders.

The Ghost of Hamlet’s Father

One of the most famous apparitions in English literature is that which appears to Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, in Shakespeare’s great tragedy, probably written at the turn of the sixteenth-seventeenth
Hamlet was composed at the end of a century which had seen an almost constant struggle in England between Protestantism and Catholicism, Reformation and Counter Reformation, focused through the alternation of Protestant and Catholic monarchs. Henry VIII, who had signalled the breach with Rome in the early decades of the century, was followed in rapid succession by his children: the short-lived, ardently Protestant Edward VI; the Catholic zealot Mary, his daughter by Catherine of Aragon; then the Protestant Elizabeth I, his daughter by Anne Boleyn. During the whole of this period, the possibility of contact with the dead was a central issue in very serious and bitter religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants in Europe.

The Reformation in England initiated far-reaching attacks on church rituals, on the priesthood, and on all magical elements of religious doctrine. In particular, the doctrine of purgatory, which had served its turn for four hundred years or more, came under attack. Protestants argued that there was no such place: after the death of the body, the souls of the dead went straight to heaven or straight to hell according to their just deserts. No subsequent action on the part of survivors could help them thwart their destiny. Men and women were saved by the faith they had shown during their life, no amount of prayers, alms, masses, or indulgences could therefore save them after their death. To counter this argument, Catholic intellectuals called upon evidence from popular folklore about ghosts and visitations. History, tradition, experience, and the Bible, they argued, combined to vouch for the existence of ghosts—and where else could ghosts have returned from but purgatory? If, as the new Protestantism taught, the souls of the dead went straight to heaven or straight to hell, then there could be no such thing as ghosts because the blessed would not want to leave heaven and the damned would not be allowed to leave hell. But if ghosts existed, then so must purgatory. In Keith Thomas’s words: “although it may be a relatively frivolous question today to ask whether or not one believes in ghosts, it was in the sixteenth century a shibboleth which distinguished Protestant
from Catholic almost as effectively as belief in the Mass or Papal Supremacy” (1971, 598).

The Catholics’ argument put Protestant divines into an awkward position. Argument demanded that they reject the notion of ghosts and apparitions in its entirety—to defeat the Catholic position it was necessary to discredit all known examples of ghostly visitations—yet this could not be easily done. Not only were there cases of ghostly apparitions in the Bible, most notably the appearance of the ghost of the prophet Samuel to King Saul under the mediumship of the Witch of Endor, but also there were centuries of popular tradition that spirits of the dead could indeed appear to men and women.

The Protestant answer to this dilemma was to discredit as much of the evidence as possible and redefine the remainder. In the writings of Lewes (Ludowig) Lavater we find the epitome of this approach. In discussing traditions of disbelief earlier, we saw how his Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night (translated into English in 1572) was designed to prove that ghosts were not, and could not be, “the souls of dead men as some have thought.” They were either the mistakes of silly, sick, or unduly sensitive people, or the result of deliberate deceit, or Catholic lies, or some natural thing misunderstood. The standard Protestant position was that most people were mistaken when they thought they saw a spirit. However, there was a possibility that Satan might disguise his devils in the shape of a dead person in order to wreak havoc with the lives and souls of poor mortals (Lea 1957, 65), and on rare occasions God might send an angel on a special mission.

A sophisticated reflection of Protestant thinking can be seen in Doctor Faustus, written by Shakespeare’s contemporary Christopher Marlowe (d. 1593). When the devil Mephistopheles appears to Faustus, he insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, he is in hell even as he speaks with Faustus in his study. When Faustus asks, “How comes it then that thou art out of Hell?” Mephistopheles replies, “Why this is Hell, nor am I out of it,” and goes on to explain that he carries his own hell of regret and deprivation around with him wherever he goes. What is not possible is that, having lost heaven, he can be anywhere else but hell. In contrast, the popular stereotypes of supernatural encounters on which
Catholic divines relied at the time may be seen in others of Shakespeare’s plays. Banquo’s gruesome ghost in Macbeth is one example, and the vengeful ghosts that bid Richard III despair on the eve of his crucial battle at Salisbury are another. These sorts of gaudy and terrifying apparitions, which appear to the person responsible for their death, were common motifs in the folklore of the day.

The ghost of Hamlet’s father, however, is different from Banquo’s ghost. He does not appear to those who have murdered him, but demands revenge from a third person. His demeanor is sober and, unlike Banquo, he is not tricked out in overt symbols of ghosthood, such as mangled wounds. These things—and the fact that other people can see him—all distance him somewhat from the popular tradition and make him a much more ambiguous figure.

As John Dover Wilson has noted: “much of the drama of the play’s first act hinges on the uncertainty of the ghost’s status” (Dover Wilson 1959, chap. 3). Where has he come from? Is he a force for good or evil? This is the dilemma that faces Hamlet. Horatio and the guards report no more than that they have seen a “figure like your father” (my emphasis). Their account makes the apparition sound like a traditional ghost: it walks at midnight in a liminal place and disappears at the first cockcrow; it appears to be anxious to make some sort of communication; it makes “the night hideous” by its presence; and it certainly looks like the king. But is it a ghost? And is it the king?

At first, Hamlet does not rush to judgment. He questions the guards very closely—“Where was this?” “Did you not speak to it?” “Arm’d, say you?” “Then saw you not his face?” “What, looked he frowningly?” “And fixed his eyes upon you?” “Stay’d it long?” “His beard was grizzled—no?” It is only when he has assured himself that the apparition does indeed appear to be the king that he decides to watch for it himself. Even so, he is plainly aware this might be risky. If it really is a ghost, it should pose no direct threat to him. If it is an angel disguised as an armed king, then it should be listened to because it is a sign that some dire trouble is brewing. But what if it is a devil pretending to be a ghost? He decides to take the risk of speaking to it: “If it assume my noble father’s person/I’ll speak to it, though Hell itself should gape/And bid me hold my peace,” he says.
Here we see a direct consequence of the Protestant reclassification of ghosts into otherworldly messengers: it intensified the fracture of the supernatural realm into two opposed camps; and, more importantly, it left people unable to interpret their experiences—a “ghost” might be an angel or a demon, but there was no easy way of telling them apart. Hamlet certainly does not know what sort of spirit he is about to address: “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!/Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,/Bring with thee airs from Heaven or blasts from Hell/Be thy intents wicked or charitable. . . .” Having decided to risk speaking to it, however, he has to put himself in further jeopardy by following it to a secluded spot where they cannot be overheard. Horatio and the guards now become very alarmed. They think that it will tempt him onto a cliff then shift into a form so terrifying that he will go mad and hurl himself into the sea. The formerly cautious Hamlet has, however, “waxe[d] desperate” at the sight of the ghost: he is happy to risk his life, he is careless of his soul, and he is willing to kill his friends if they try to stop him. The signs are not good.

When they reach “a remote part of the platform” the apparition announces that it is his “father’s spirit,” doomed (in an odd mixture of popular folklore and Catholic theology) “for a certain term to walk the night/And, for the day, confin’d to waste in fires/Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/Are burnt and purgd away.” Morning is approaching and it must soon return to the “sulphurous and tormenting flames” to which Claudius has condemned the King by cutting him off “in the blossoms of [his] sin . . . With all [his] imperfections on [his] head.” The tale it tells is one of lust, murder, and betrayal, couched in the intemperate language of hate and disgust; its demands are for revenge against Claudius. But, though the apparition says it is the spirit of the dead king, who knows whether it is telling the truth? It seems a little confused about its exact whereabouts. Is it in purgatory, or is it in hell? It says its sins are being purged away, but its description of its present state is hellish (“I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/Would harrow up they soul; freeze thy young blood;/Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres;/Thy knotted and combined locks to part,/And each particular hair to stand on end . . .”).
Hamlet himself still seems to have a lingering doubt. After it has left, his first involuntary exclamation is, “O all you host of Heaven! O earth! what else?/And shall I couple Hell?” However, he immediately brushes this thought aside and intemperately vows, on no other evidence than the word of the ghost, that his mother is a “pernicious woman” and his uncle a “smiling, damned villain.” Every thought and action, he swears, will now be bent to doing the ghost’s bidding; he will be consumed by the ghost’s command. The ghost exits, but later we hear his voice “beneath.” Where is the ghost now? The realm beneath the earth is hell. According to Protestant theology, if the old king is in hell, he shouldn’t be able to get out. The confusions may be Shakespeare’s not the ghost’s, but that hardly matters. The ambiguities about its whereabouts, status, and intentions would not have been lost on a contemporary audience.

The strictly correct Protestant position would be that, if the ghost is not an angelic messenger, then it must be a devil or the delusion of a sick mind. It isn’t very likely that it is a delusion because Horatio and the guards have seen it too. But, if Hamlet was in his right mind before (and he seemed steady enough), he certainly seems unhinged now. From the moment he returns from speaking with the ghost, he is fraught and nervous, his words are “wild and whirling,” and he seems confused, one moment alleging that “it is an honest ghost,” the next trying to avoid its demands as it calls to him from the earth below and referring to it as an “old mole.” He tells his friends they should not be alarmed “[h]ow strange or odd so’er I bear myself” because he will just be putting “an antic disposition on”—but what rational or strategic reason does he have for acting oddly? Could it not be that he is aware that his wits have been turned, as his friends feared, and he is trying to cover up for his peculiar behavior? Has the ghost betrayed Hamlet into madness and murder by telling devilish lies about the old king’s death?

Certainly the destruction which its intervention lets loose on Hamlet, his family, and the nation does not give one confidence in its altruism. Modern directors and audiences often conclude that the tragedy unfolds because Hamlet dithers and puts off doing his duty of revenge. A contemporary audience might have
come to just the opposite conclusion—that the tragedy is caused because he is rash; if he had been more circumspect, the madness and mayhem he unleashes in Denmark might have been avoided.

So, for a contemporary audience there was an interpretative option that is mostly overlooked today. For many who first witnessed it, it might seem that the tragedy was literally the work of the devil.

**The Cock Lane Poltergeist**

I have already recommended Andrew Lang’s wonderful book *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (1894). He drew his title from a celebrated poltergeist case that was the talk of all London in the mid-eighteenth century. It is worth looking at a famous, more or less contemporary account of this event for the light it throws on educated attitudes to ghosts and visitations in the so-called “Age of Enlightenment” in a city that was one of the most sophisticated in the world at that time.

During the eighteenth century, the development of modern science and the “mechanical philosophy” (see Easlea 1980) which accompanied it revolutionized educated men’s ideas about the world and threw out the traditional concepts of several centuries. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Royal Society was already congratulating itself for this achievement. In his history of the society, Thomas Spratt explained that:

> as for the TERRORS and MISAPPREHENSIONS which commonly . . . make men’s hearts to fail and boggle at Trifles . . . from the time in which the REAL PHILOSOPHY has appear’d, there is scarce any whisper concerning such HORRORS: Every man is unshaken at those Tales, at which his ANCESTORS trembled. ([1667] 1952, 339–41)

In the face of the eighteenth century’s overpowering confidence that nature was subdued and irrational fears abolished, at least in public educated men began to feel that belief in ghosts was somehow vulgar and disreputable.
In earlier centuries the world had been thought of as a semi-magical place, and strange entities such as ghosts had had their due rank and function. When the world became a machine, there was no room left for them, no possible role for them to play, no reason for them to bother people. They could only be illusory, private experiences or meaningless, inharmonious intrusions.

For the folklorist or historian of ideas, the eighteenth century creates particular difficulties, for, despite the official skepticism, at a private and personal level many people continued to believe in ghosts. Throughout the century, there was a wealth of popular occult literature. The works of seventeenth-century tractarians like Joseph Glanvil and his contemporaries Richard Bovet and George Sinclair were still to be seen in tradesmen’s shops and farmers’ houses and exerted a considerable influence on the minds of young people (Hutchinson 1720; see also Bovet [1684] 1951; Glanvil 1681; and Sinclair [1685] 1969). Antiquarians, too, were amassing significant amounts of information about popular concepts of the supernatural, mainly culled from village custom and country belief (notably Bourne [1725] 1977; Brand 1777; and Grose [1787] 1790). Nor was such belief confined to uneducated, rural people. There remained a significant number of educated people who still, in the privacy of their own hearts, clung to the old ideas. Keith Thomas notes, for example, that belief in ghosts was “a reality in the eighteenth century for many educated men, however much the rationalists laughed at them” (1971, 591).

It was in this sort of context—public skepticism but (at least a degree of) private belief—that the Cock Lane poltergeist excited public attention for a full five years during the mid-1700s. The knockings and scratchings at the house in Cock Lane were said to be caused by the restless spirit of the common-law wife of one Mr. K——, who was thought by many (including the lady’s family) to have poisoned her in order to come by her small inheritance. The knockings emanated from a young girl, and fashionable London turned out to sit in her bedroom and listen to the manifestations. The case was discussed with all the trappings of eighteenth-century rationalism in a monograph attributed to the poet, novelist, and dramatist Oliver Goldsmith. The author’s presentation of what he sees as the facts, his sneering language and dismissive logic, are just

“Alas, Poor Ghost!”
as interesting as the story itself and entirely representative of the attitudes of his age. While we must admire the passion with which he defends a defenseless man and upholds the principles of natural justice, we must note that the account contains a lot of special pleading and logical sleight of hand. All those who believe in the ghost are “credulous,” “ignorant publicans,” and so on; all those who disbelieve it are of the highest rank and probity.

The account is taken from the pamphlet *The Mystery Revealed* of 1742:

> Of all accusations . . . few seem so extraordinary, as that which has lately engrossed the attention of the public, and which is still carrying on at an house in Cock Lane near Smithfield. The continuance of the noises, the numbers who have heard them, the perseverance of the girl, and the atrociousness of the murder she pretends to detect, are circumstances that were never perhaps so favorably united for the carrying on of an imposture before. The credulous are prejudiced by the child’s apparent benevolence: her age and ignorance wipe off the imputation of her being able to deceive, and one or two more, who pretend actually to have seen the apparition, are ready to strengthen her evidence. Upon these grounds, a man, otherwise of a fair character, as will shortly appear, is rendered odious to society, shunned by such as immediately take imputation for guilt, and made unhappy in his family, without having even in law a power of redress. . . .

The story of the ghost is in brief, as follows: for some time a knocking and scratching has been heard in the night at Mr P——s’s, where Mr K—— formerly lodged, to the great terror of the family; and several methods were tried, to discover the imposture, but without success. This knocking and scratching was generally heard in a little room, in which Mr P——s’s two children lay; the eldest of which was a girl about twelve or thirteen years old. The purport of this knocking was not thoroughly conceived, till the eldest child pretended to see
the actual ghost of the deceased lady. . . . When she had seen the ghost, a weak, ignorant publican also, who lived in the neighbourhood, asserted that he had seen it too; and Mr P——s himself . . . he also saw the ghost at the same time: the girl saw it without hands, in a shroud; the other two saw it with hands, all luminous and shining. There was one unlucky circumstance however in the apparition: though it appeared to several persons, and could knock, scratch, and flutter, yet its coming would have been to no manner of purpose, had it not been kindly assisted by the persons thus haunted. It was impossible for a ghost that could not speak, to make any discovery; the people therefore, to whom it appeared, kindly undertook to make the discovery themselves; and the ghost, by knocking, gave its assent to their methods of wording the accusation. . . . When therefore the spirit taught the assistants, or rather the assistants had taught the spirit (for that could not speak) that Mr K—— was the murderer, the road lay then open, and every night the farce was carried on, to the amusement of several, who attended with all the good-humour, which spending one night with novelty inspires; they jested with the ghost, soothed it, flattered it, while none was truly unhappy, but him whose character was thus rendered odious, and trifled with, merely to amuse idle curiosity.

To have a proper idea of this scene, as it is now carried on, the reader is to conceive a very small room with a bed in the middle, the girl at the usual hour of going to bed, is undressed and put in with proper solemnity; the spectators are next introduced, who sit looking at each other, suppressing laughter, and wait in silent expectation for the opening of the scene. As the ghost is a good deal offended at incredulity, the persons present are to conceal theirs, if they have any, as by this concealment they can only hope to gratify their curiosity. For, if they shew either before, or when the knocking is begun, a too prying, inquisitive, or ludicrous turn
of thinking, the ghost continues usually silent. . . . The spectators therefore have nothing for it, but to sit quiet and credulous, otherwise they must hear no ghost, which is no small disappointment to persons, who have come for no other purpose.

The girl who knows, by some secret, when the ghost is to appear, sometimes apprizes the assistants of its intended visitation. It first begins to scratch, and then to answer questions, giving two knocks for a negative, and one for an affirmative. By this means it tells whether a watch, when held up, be white, blue, yellow, or black; how many clergymen are in the room, though in this sometimes mistaken; it evidently distinguishes white men from negroes, with several other marks of sagacity; however, it is sometimes mistaken in questions of a private nature, when it deigns to answer them: for instance; the ghost . . . called her father John instead of Thomas, a mistake indeed a little extraordinary in a ghost; but perhaps she was willing to verify the old proverb, that it is a wise child that knows its own father. However, though sometimes right, and sometimes wrong, she pretty invariably persists in one story, namely, that she was poisoned, in a cup of purl, by red arsenic, a poison unheard of before, by Mr K—— in her last illness; and that she heartily wishes him hanged.

It is no easy matter to remark upon an evidence of this nature; but it may not be unnecessary to observe, that the ghost, though fond of company, is particularly modest upon these occasions, an enemy to the light of a candle, and almost always most silent before those, from whose rank and understanding she could most reasonably expect redress. When a committee of gentlemen of eminence for their rank, learning, and good sense, were assembled to give the ghost a fair hearing, then, one might have thought, would have been the time to knock loudest, and to exert every effort; then was the time to bring the guilty to justice, and to give every possible method of information; but in what manner she
behaved upon this test of her reality, will better appear from the committee’s own words, than mine.

[Here the author transcribes the overwhelmingly negative report of the investigating committee, which concludes, “It is therefore the opinion of the whole of the assembly, that the child has some art of making or counterfeiting particular noises, and that there is no agency of higher cause.” The author then goes on in his own voice.]

The ghost knows perfectly well before whom to exhibit. She could as we see venture well enough to fright the ladies, or perhaps some men, about as courageous as ladies, and as discerning; but when the committee had come up, and gathered round the bed, it was no time then to attempt at deception, the ghost was angry, and very judiciously kept her hunters at bay. . . .

The question in this case, therefore, is not, whether the ghost be true or false, but who are the contrivers, or what can be the motives for this vile deception? . . . But still it seems something extraordinary, how this imposition could be for so long carried on without a discovery. However . . . [it] was the observation of Erasmus, that whenever people flock to see a miracle, they are generally sure of seeing a miracle; they bring an heated imagination, and an eager curiosity to the scene of the action, give themselves up blindly to deception, and each is better pleased with having it to say, that he had seen something very strange, than that he was made the dupe of his own credulity.

**The Clodd/Lang Debate**

In the annals of folklore history, probably the best-known debate between the rationalist and supernatualist cultures is that between two of the “great team” (Dorson 1968a, 202–65) of Victorian folklorists, Andrew Lang and Edward Clodd. As their dispute is an almost perfect illustration of the debating strategies of the representatives of the traditions of belief and disbelief, it is worth describing in some detail.
Andrew Lang was not only an expert and prolific writer on ghost traditions but also a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR); Edward Clodd, on the other hand, was a stout-hearted rationalist who, the following year, was to scandalize Victorian society (and provoke the former prime minister of England, W. E. Gladstone, to withdraw his subscription to the Folklore Society) by arguing in his presidential address of 1896 that the rites of Christianity were but part and parcel of a long line of similar practices going back to the cult of Dionysus and beyond (Clodd 1896, 43–59). Both men were formidable debaters: the tradition of belief could have no quicker a thinker or waspish a character to represent it than Lang; the tradition of disbelief no more fearless and combative a follower than Clodd.

Battle is first joined by Clodd in his first presidential address, which included a passage that sets out to demolish the reputation of the SPR and prove that belief in spirits was mere superstition (Clodd 1895a, 78–81): “Superstitions which are the outcome of ignorance can only awaken pity,” he says. Superstition disguised as science, however, merits scorn rather than pity. The SPR, by encouraging belief in the possibility of communication between the living and the dead, promulgates superstitions of this second type. What they advocate is just “barbaric spiritual philosophy.” Time, space, and the laws of gravity are all ignored by its adherents, merely “untrustworthy observers” who keep their minds in water-tight compartments, “suspend or narcotize [their] judgement, and contribute to the rise and spread of another of the epidemic delusions of which history provides warning examples.” “The Society will sell you not only the Proceedings . . . but glass balls of various diameters for crystalgazing from three shillings upwards.” Entrenched within the dominant tradition of disbelief, Clodd does not trouble to explain the grounds for this round condemnation. He plainly feels that it is not necessary to enter into serious discussion about “the twaddle of witless ghosts”—it is simply enough to say that it is twaddle. It is not until he has to take on Lang, in fact, that he is forced to justify these opinions and discuss specific instances.

In his “Protest of a Psycho-Folklorist,” Lang immediately gets his teeth into Clodd’s argument, taking the latter’s assertions point
by point, citing cases and examples, upbraiding his president for being himself unscientific, for being led by his prejudices to miss good opportunities for useful folkloristic research, and for ignoring both tradition and empirical evidence (1895). All of these are classic strategies in the believers’ repertoire.

Lang begins his attack with a deft argumentum ad hominem: “Mr Clodd asks us to contemn the ‘superstitions’ of Dr Alfred Wallace, Mr Crooke, Professor Lodge, Mr A. J. Balfour and all of the eminent men of science, British and foreign” who support the SPR. Lang then moves on to a blistering attack against Clodd’s remarks about the sale of crystal balls:

That many persons are so constituted as to see hallucinations in glass balls I cannot possibly doubt, without branding some of my most intimate and least superstitious friends as habitual liars. I see nothing odd in a glass ball, but if I give my friends the lie, then I act as the dreamless Irish king would have done, had he called all men liars who averred that they could dream. Granting, then, that such hallucinations exist, why on earth should they not be studied like any other phenomenon? Is it because you can buy a ball for three shillings?

To have such hallucinations when looking into crystal balls, he argues, is just as much an individual peculiarity as, for example, having hypnagogic illusions, and “if Mr Clodd has these, he believes in their existence. Even if he has not, he probably believes because so very many people do have them.” Then Lang closes in for the kill with a coup de grace typical of the tradition of belief—an appeal to superior evidence: “To everyone who thinks of it, the existence or non-existence of such subjective pictures must be a matter of evidence. I have enough to satisfy myself, and perhaps, if Mr Clodd had as much, he would be satisfied also.”

The name-dropping and the appeals to human experience continue: “I have Dr Carpenter on my side.” “Mr Crookes, a distinguished man of science. . . .” “Australian blacks, Presbyterians, Celts, Platonists, Peruvians, Catholics, Puritan divines [were all]
witnesses,” “Mr E. B. Tylor . . . attended seances,” “Mr Darwin’s own mind was open on the matter,” “countless French, German and Italian savants . . . ,” “the Irish say, the Welsh say, the Burmese say, the Shanars say, the Negroes say, that there are such and such phenomena,” “the evidence . . . of cameras and of the eyes of living and distinguished men . . . ,” “the evidence of living and honourable men,” and so on throughout the whole essay.

Lang’s second line of attack focuses on the rationalist’s dismissive explanations of unusual occurrences. A lighthearted suggestion of Clodd’s—that psychic phenomena are the result of a disordered liver—is disingenuously taken seriously and then stood on its head: “If Mr Clodd explains all by ‘a disordered liver,’ then a disordered liver is the origin of a picturesque piece of folklore. That piece of knowledge is acquired for the race.” This idea is then pursued in a spirit partly serious, partly humorous, Lang suggesting that a “real” scientist and a “real” folklorist would surely be hot on the trail of such vital clues to the origins of folklore:

Take another even more extreme example, the folklore of levitation. Some man or woman is seen by witnesses, who often give evidence on oath, to rise in the air and stay therein. I have elsewhere shown that this story is as widely distributed as any Märchen.

Then comes D. D. Home, and professes to do the trick. What an opportunity for a folklorist! One can imagine a President of the Folklore Society rushing eagerly to examine Mr Home, and to explain at once and for ever the origin of this chapter in folklore.

Clodd, he implies, would have “rushed” in the opposite direction! Similarly, on the matter of ghostly lights, another familiar motif in folklore, the SPR has collected many contemporary accounts. Rather than sneering at them, folklorists should be grateful—especially if Clodd is right in thinking all such accounts are mere delusions. Here is the chance to examine raw data scientifically: “with what gratitude should we thank the SPR for providing us with nascent delusions in situ, as it were, so that we may compare these with similar delusions in history.” This is true science, he
argues, and men like Tylor who attended seances “I call . . . not ‘superstitious,’ but ‘scientific.’”

After twelve pages of detailed and spirited argument, he returns to the subject of crystal-gazing and rises to his grand finale, engaging in a last bit of name-dropping and winding up his argument about what is truly scientific:

When psychical students are accused, en masse, of approaching their subjects with a dominant prejudice, the charge, to me, seems inaccurate (as a matter of fact) and, moreover, very capable of being retorted. Not the man who listens to the evidence, but the man who refuses to listen (as if he were, at least negatively, omniscient) appears to me to suffer from a dominant prejudice. . . . Of all things, modern popular science has most cause to beware of attributing prejudice to students who refuse its Shibboleth.

After this onslaught, Clodd is compelled to marshal his arguments. In his “Reply to the Foregoing ‘Protest,’” he focuses his attack this time not on the content of the SPR’s method—“which,” he claims, “under the guise of the scientific, is pseudo-scientific” (1895b, 248), citing as an illustration the case of their “Census of Hallucinations” (Sidgwick and Johnson 1894). Still, instead of criticizing the reliability of its methods and findings (which were, indeed, suspect) he sidetracks into a typical bit of special pleading. A quarter of the accounts in the “Census,” he says, were given at second hand, and, moreover, the tables show “as expected” that more women than men answered the question in the affirmative, and that “the lower the intellectual standpoint, the higher are the percentages of affirmative answers and hallucinations.” Think, too, of the people who manned the inquiry, he urges:

One tenth of the collectors were drawn from classes not highly educated, as small shopkeepers and coastguardsmen. Nor does the personnel of the committee itself inspire our confidence. I should prefer five thorough going skeptics to Professor Sidgwick and his wife, Miss
Alice Johnson, and Messrs Myers and Podmore (the two ladies taking, it appears, the more active share in the whole business).

After this bit of reasoning, Clodd moves on to express the conventional opinion that strange experiences need not be attributed to the operation of supernatural forces, but are most probably caused by physical or mental disorders:

Who doubts that they are the effect of a morbid condition of that intricate, delicately-poised structure, the nervous system. . . . Voices, whether divine or of the dead, may be heard; actual figures seen; odours smelt; when the nervous system is out of gear. A mental image becomes a visual image, an imagined pain a real pain. . . . This abnormal state . . . may be organic or functional. Organic, when disease is present; functional, through excessive fatigue, lack of food or sleep, or derangement of the digestive system. . . . Only the mentally anaemic, the emotionally overwrought, the unbalanced, are the victims.

Having gone through this familiar list of naturalistic explanations for unusual occurrences and perceptions, Clodd then moves on to state in uncompromising terms the grounds on which his skepticism, and that of all adherents of the tradition of disbelief, is ultimately based: that is, the deceivability of the human senses and the willingness of unscrupulous operators to exploit that deceivability. Of levitation, for example, he argues:

I should want the levitation repeated many times before many witnesses. I would not trust my own eyes in the matter. I cannot forget that man’s senses have been his arch-deceivers, and his preconceptions their abettors, throughout human history: that advance has been possible only as he has escaped through the discipline of the intellect from the illusive impressions about phenomena which the senses convey.
Then, neatly turning the tables on Lang by quoting one of the latter's “authorities,” he adds:

And I fall back on the words of Dr Carpenter . . . “with every disposition to accept facts when I could once clearly satisfy myself that they were facts, I have had to come to the conclusion that . . . there was either intentional deception on the part of interested persons, or else self-deception. . . . There is nothing too strange to be believed by those who have once surrendered their judgement to the extent of accepting as credible things which common-sense tells us are entirely incredible.

Finally, in resounding terms, Clodd arrives at the last premise in the catalogue of traditional arguments—that, even if no rational explanation of the strange occurrences is forthcoming as yet, in time one will be found. Before succumbing, for instance, to tales of mystic lights, he says, we need much more “terrestrial light” on the subject, in order to find “the naturalistic explanation to which the belief must ultimately yield.”

One can imagine how great Clodd’s joy must have been when a great scandal hit the psychic world. Eusapia Palladino had achieved an international reputation as a medium and attracted considerable attention and support. Even the Spectator had given her a favorable write-up; as Clodd puts it, the journal had “indulged in ‘high falutin’ talk on this triumph of psychical research . . . admonishing scientific men that at their peril did they stand aloof, or still insist that the thing ‘was a trick, a fraud, and nothing else.’” However, put to the test in a private sitting, Eusapia was, in Lang’s colloquial phrase, “busted up”—found to be cheating (Clodd 1896, 37–40). Clodd could not help but gloat over Lang, and reserved the first part of his notorious 1896 presidential address for kicking his opponent while he was down: “that an illiterate, but astute, Neapolitan conjuror should have thus befooled men of high intellectual capacity justifies my strictures on the incompetence of scientific specialists off their own beat to detect trickery.” Warming to his point, he cites other instances of deception by mediums, rejoicing,
for example, that “that colossal old liar, Madame Blavatsky,” was reported to have said:

I have not met with more than two or three men who knew how to observe, and see, and remark what was going on around them. It is simply amazing! At least nine out of every ten people are entirely devoid of the capacity of observation and of the power of remembering accurately what took place even an hour before. How often it has happened that, under my direction and revision, minutes of various occurrences and phenomena have been drawn up; lo, the most innocent and conscientious people, even skeptics, even those who actually suspected me, have signed en toutes lettres as witnesses at the foot of the minutes! And all the time I knew that what had happened was not in the least what was stated in the minutes.

Clodd goes on to quote other instances of mediums who had been “busted up,” concluding triumphantly by quoting Lang himself (from “a half-bantering letter where one hears him whistling to keep up his courage”): “It really looks as if ‘psychical research’ does somehow damage and pervert the logical faculty of scientific minds.”

Though it looked as if luck had dealt the winning hand to Clodd, Lang did not stay down for long. Indeed, in the preface to the new edition of Cock Lane and Common-Sense, he had his last attempt “to make the Folk-Lore Society see that such things as modern reports of wraiths, ghosts, ‘fire-walking,’ ‘corpse-lights,’ ‘crystal-gazing,’ and so on, are within their province” (quoted in Dorson 1968b, 458–63). There is an element of despair, however, detectable in his complaint that:

As he [the author] understands the situation, folklorists and anthropologists will hear gladly about wraiths, ghosts, corpse-candles, hauntings, crystal-gazing, and walking unharmed through fire, as long as these things are part of a vague rural tradition, or of savage belief. But, as soon as there is first-hand evidence of honourable men
and women for the apparent existence of any of the phenomena enumerated, then Folklore officially refuses to have anything to do with the subject. Folklore will register and compare vague savage or popular beliefs; but when educated living persons vouch for phenomena which (if truly stated) account in part for the origin of these popular or savage beliefs, then Folklore turns a deaf ear. The logic of this attitude does not commend itself to the author of *Cock Lane and Common-Sense*.

Such an attitude, he regrets, stems from the fact that minds are already closed:

The truth is that anthropology and folklore have a readymade theory as to the savage and illusory origin of all belief in the spiritual, from ghosts to God. The reported occurrence, therefore, of phenomena which suggest the possible existence of causes of belief not accepted by anthropology, is a distasteful thing and is avoided.

Somewhat wearily, he goes through the familiar arguments—testimony to the supernatural comes from “undeniably honest and absolutely contemporary” sources; not one of the explanations offered by the rationalists holds water; and the evidence for ghosts is as good as the evidence for anything else:

We cannot expect human testimony suddenly to become impeccable and infallible in all details, just because a “ghost” is concerned. Nor is it logical to demand here a degree of congruity in testimony, which daily experience of human evidence proves to be impossible, even in ordinary matters.

Indeed, in the last resort, he argues, rationalists are as “unscientific” as they claim that believers are. Any of their explanations “is a theory like another, and, like another, can be tested” if only they would deign to do it. But they will not, for their prejudices are too deeply ingrained:
Manifestly it is as fair for a psychical researcher to say to Mr Clodd, “You won’t examine my haunted house because you are afraid of being obliged to believe in spirits,” as it is fair for Mr Clodd to say to a psychical researcher, “You only examine a haunted house because you want to believe in spirits.”

And there he rests his case.

It is not possible to say who won this dispute; there can be no victory where defeat is not conceded, just as there can be no discussion where there is no meeting of minds. Lang and Clodd simply stand either side of a great divide, entrenched in opposed traditional philosophies, using opposed traditional arguments.

We are fortunate, however, to have such a detailed record of their debate, for not only is it a fascinating chapter in the history of folklore, it also shows how even the most astute and ardent debaters do not (and perhaps cannot) step outside the arguments allotted to their team in the philosophical tug-of-war. Though cogently stated and enthusiastically expressed, their reasoning is almost entirely predictable. Lang says no more and no less than Joseph Glanvil in the seventeenth century or Margot, Violet, and Kate in the twentieth century. Clodd’s opinions and arguments are just those that Lavater used four hundred years ago and those that Colette, Stella, and Enid employ today.

THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER

Oldham, 1982:

Michael, Michael’s teacher, who was a temporary, a supply teacher, they were talking one day about ghosts, and she said that her friend at Leeds had been out for the evening with a friend of hers, a gentleman friend, and they’d spent the evening in Leeds and were driving home late, very late, on a very wet, dark night, and they lived in, on the outskirts of Leeds somewhere, and as they were driving home, they passed a bus stop and there was a young girl, a youngish girl, standing at the
bus stop, and they drove straight past and then thought it was odd she should be standing there. It’s so late. The buses had finished.

So, the young man said he would take her [the friend] home and then go back and see if she [the girl] was still there, and if she was still there, he would give her a lift home.

So he dropped her off and went back to the bus stop and found the young girl still there and asked if he could give her a lift home because she was getting very wet and there were no more buses that night.

So he asked her where she lived. She gave him the address, the number and the name of the street, so they set off.

Driven a little way when they got to traffic lights, and when he looked, she’d gone! Couldn’t be seen! So he couldn’t understand it at all.

Next morning, he went round for his friend who he’d dropped off earlier and told her what had happened.

Very perplexed about it.

So they decided to go to this address that the girl had given. Knocked at the door. An elderly lady answered and they said, “Did a young lady, her daughter or anybody, live there, because they’d given a lift to this young lady the night before, who’d given this address, and couldn’t find her. She’d just disappeared and they didn’t know where she was,” and the old lady burst into tears and said that was her daughter who had died two years earlier on that same day in an accident at those traffic lights! (Story told to G. B. by Mrs. Andrea Biggs, 1983)

“The Vanishing Hitchhiker” is probably one of the best-known modern ghost stories. First brought to academic attention by a trio of articles in California Folklore Quarterly (Beardsley and Hankey 1942; 1943; Jones 1944b), it attracted immediate attention. It has now become one of the most frequently collected and widely discussed modern stories in the world of academic folklore.
By 1993 Paul Smith and I were able to list over 150 citations for the story in our bibliography of contemporary legend studies (Bennett and Smith 1993), and the number is growing daily. It has been collected from places as far apart as Algeria, Romania, and Pakistan (see, respectively, Dumerchat 1990, 266–67; Brunvand 1986, 49–50; and Goss 1984, 12), and in a variety of media—literary works, story compilations, folklore journals, *Fate* magazine, and as topical rumor reported by newspapers and heard in conversation—and it is extremely culturally variable (see, for example, Glazer 1986; 1987; Luomala 1972; Mitchell 1976; and Wilson 1975). Vanishing Hitchhikers turn up as aliens, angels, saints, Jesus, vampires, nuns, and malevolent spirits, among other things (see, respectively, Roberts 1987; Knierim 1985, 241; Cunningham 1979, 47; Fish 1976; Goss 1982, 1707; Dodson 1943; and Mitchell 1976). But in the Protestant regions of North America and Western Europe they are most often numinous beings or supernatural entities. The numinous beings usually reveal their identities by making prophecies; the supernatural entities usually turn out to be ghosts. So there are two main strands—prophesying hitchhikers and phantom hitchhikers.

In my earliest study of the “Vanishing Hitchhiker” I looked at the story in its “phantom” form, and argued that it was not really modern, as the first scholars to study it had believed, and that it was best seen in the context of a long tradition of roadside ghosts (Bennett 1984). However, I have recently come to the conclusion that, though prophesying hitchhikers indubitably are part of a very old tradition, the archetypical phantom hitchhiker is relatively modern after all, though by no means as “modern” as Beardsley and Hankey assumed (see Bennett 1998). I now believe there are two features of the story as told today in the Protestant West that are the result of developments in ghostlore that have taken place there in the last 100–150 years. These are the rise of the stranger-ghost and the institutionalization of the connection between ghosts and unnatural deaths.

The concept of the stranger-ghost arises to a large extent from the fracture of the supernatural world into two opposing camps, which I have discussed earlier in the context of the ghost of Hamlet’s father. One of the results of this fracture was to separate
purposefulness from terror. In medieval times ghosts could be both purposeful and terrifying. The ghosts that appeared to demand Christian burial or masses for their souls were appalling apparitions. They were so alarming that it was immediately evident that they were ghosts, but less obvious that they were human. This was still true, though to a lesser extent, with post-Reformation apparitions. Though the ghosts that appeared in the works of Glanvil, Beaumont, and Baxter at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries were purposeful and often recognizable, they were still terrifying and there could be absolutely no doubt that they were dead. This began to change, however, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Terrifying aspects of the supernatural began to be concentrated in purposeless hauntings, such as knockings, poltergeists, animal ghosts, and the ghosts of wicked people (who could appear in any of these guises). Purposeful apparitions began to take on a more ordinary human form and motivation. They did not need to be terrifying any more; they had long ago lost their function as a sanction for religion, and more recently had lost many of their moral functions too.

Once purposeful ghosts began to assume more lifelike human forms, it opened up the opportunity for storytellers to experiment with a new sort of supernatural encounter. If the apparition was of a person unknown to the percipient, he or she might not recognize it as a ghost and might mistake it for a living person. By the 1870s, these sorts of accounts became a standard feature of folklore collections as subsequent workers went over and over the same ground, borrowing from one another to create ever larger compilations. For these stories to work best, the percipient should be in a strange place and the ghost should not only look like a person but behave like a person. These ghosts often appeared in a particular location and assisted lost travellers. Previously, purposeful ghosts had almost invariably appeared to people who had known them in life, and had haunted people rather than locations. But the rise of the stranger-ghost changed that.

The “phantom” variants of “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend complex obviously depend on the stranger-ghost convention. Some of them feature purposeful ghosts who appear regularly in a certain spot to warn motorists of the bad bend in the road where
they were killed. The earliest students of the legend, Beardsley and Hankey, had one in which a hitchhiking ghost saved a traveller from meeting death at the spot she herself had died (1942, 315). A similar story excited the French press in the early 1980s. It told how a girl hitchhiker warned a driver about a dangerous bend and thus saved his life before vanishing. She had, of course, been killed there (see Campion-Vincent and Renard 1992, 45; Dumerchat 1990, 257–59; Dupi 1982). There are legends, too, that are quite similar to Vanishing Hitchhiker stories in theme and structure, if not part of the same complex, notably, “The Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man” (Edgerton 1968). This tells how a traveller encounters somebody in the street or in a public place and is asked to undertake an errand of mercy (usually to bring a doctor or a priest to a mortally sick person). Louis C. Jones presented a couple of examples in his response to Beardsley and Hankey (1944b, 287–88), and my study of phantom hitchhikers includes a personal example which follows the familiar “Vanishing Hitchhiker” plot in almost every respect (Bennett 1984, 56).

However, phantom hitchhikers do not necessarily have to be motivated by altruism. They can be about their own affairs without regard to the living. In many stories the ghost is that of a young and beautiful woman who has been killed on the way to a dance (for a typical version see Montell 1975, 127). She does not immediately disappear but spends the evening in the traveller’s company. In an example from New York State, the narrator has the traveller and ghost fix a date for the next night, then for the next; and “each night they met and played and partied at her door” (Jones 1959, 173). That these are rather incredible stories doesn’t concern us; the point is that the girl has been killed while en route to a dance, but doesn’t let that stop her going. Her haunting consists of a compulsive enactment of pleasures denied. In other stories the ghost is urgently trying to get home. This is sometimes explicitly written in, so; the ghost’s family will explain that she will always try “to return home on her birthdays and at Christmas” (Musick 1977, 178), or the narrator will explain in his or her own voice that “it happens on rainy nights; that’s when she wants to get home” (Jones 1959, 164). But what happens when the plot provides no overt motivation for the ghost to be haunting a particular place? What can a storyteller
do to give the tale an acceptable beginning, middle, and end in terms of ghostly conventions?

That brings me to the second feature of the “phantom” variant of “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” that seems to me to be a relatively modern characteristic—that is, its reliance on the idea that an unnatural death may lead to a haunting. It is worth noting that it was not till the eighteenth century that sudden or unnatural death began to be seen as one of the prime reasons for the dead to be restless (a trend that was accelerated by the publication of numerous popular ghostlore compilations in the second half of the nineteenth century that largely focused on dramatic and exotic hauntings).

The connection between ghosts and suicide, murder, and untimely death is so set now in our mental habits that it seems strange to reflect that in medieval thought, and in writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apparitions were not necessarily even of dead people. They might be wraiths of living people in dire distress, as in the famous case where John Donne “saw” his wife with a dead baby in her arms while he was abroad in France (for accounts of this case, see Aubrey 1696, chap. 5; Beaumont 1705, 107–8); or they might be emanations of the spirits of wicked people, as in Richard Baxter’s famous horror story, where the stinking wraith of her depraved husband tries to get into bed with the virtuous Mrs. Bowen even though he is far away with his regiment in Ireland (Baxter [1691] 1840, 9–16, 49–52).

I think the move from medieval to modern ideas about causes of the dead being restless has to do with changing concepts of what constitutes a “bad death.” In the Middle Ages, a ghost’s reasons for walking were customarily linked to its postmortem experiences and underpinned the teaching of the church about the nature of the afterlife. After the Reformation, when the Protestant theology denied the existence of purgatory, ghosts tended to be restless less for what was happening to them in the afterlife and more because of what was happening to their survivors in the mundane world. So, Francis Grose describing the traditions of his grandfather’s generation in his Provincial Glossary¹ sneeringly notes that ghosts return

“Alas, Poor Ghost!”
for some special errand such as the discovery of a murderer, or to procure restitution in land, or money unjustly withheld from an orphan or widow . . . ; sometime, the occasion of spirits revisiting this world is to inform their heirs in what secret place or private drawer in an old trunk they have hidden the title deeds of the estate, or buried their money or plate . . . . ([1787] 1790, 5–6)

So there appears to have been a gradual movement, from assessing whether a death is “good” or “bad” in terms of what happens next to the soul, to judging it in terms of what happens next to the survivors.

During the nineteenth century, this “what happens next” framework begins to be replaced with a backward-looking emphasis that primarily assesses the death in terms of the life that went before. Stories abound in legend collections about evil men who become animal ghosts or terrifying apparitions after their deaths, and have to be “laid” or tricked into bottles and thrown in the Red Sea (see, for example, Burne 1883; Hunt 1865; Ingram 1884; and Thiselton Dyer 1898). I have argued elsewhere that the evidence from contemporary ghostlore suggests that this time frame is now being squeezed in both directions towards a concept of a “bad” death which is personal and private, and the primary focus of which is the manner of dying (Bennett 1997). A corollary of this is that, whereas until perhaps the early years of the eighteenth century it was evil-doers who could not rest in their graves, nowadays it is the victims who are restless.

Be that as it may, by the end of the nineteenth century, in Britain at least, the relationship between apparitions and untimely or violent deaths was just assumed, and ghosts were thought to haunt the living either because they had been cut off so quickly that they had left necessary business unfinished, or because they had had a death so cruel or violent that the death itself could not die and went on being reenacted. Similar patterns are observable in stories collected in America in the early twentieth century. Louis C. Jones’s study of the ghosts of New York, for example, shows that more than a third died violent or sudden deaths (1944a), and in Rosalie Hankey’s article on California ghosts,
murder and suicide top the list of reasons given for non-malevolent ghosts to walk (1942).

“The Vanishing Hitchhiker” in its “phantom” form fits this pattern so well that it can be used as a case study of what a “bad death” might mean today for many people in America and Western Europe. The first element of the “bad death” as depicted in these stories is sudden and violent death. Most of the phantom hitchhikers have died in road traffic accidents, though less frequently she (or he; there are many examples of male hitchhikers, see Bennett 1998) has been murdered or is the victim of a horrific death. One girl dies in a house fire; a man is stuffed in a barrel and rolled downhill; an old lady is cemented into a barn floor; and so on.

The second element is the concept of an “undeserved” death. Most of the ghosts are stereotypically innocent characters—loving husbands, caring mothers, and beautiful daughters—yet all die by accident or violence. In an American story, there are a whole family of hitchhikers, pious pioneers murdered on the way home from a prayer meeting (Musick 1977, 76). In another, the hitchhiker is a young husband on the way to see his first child (Fonda 1977). In a story taken up by the U.K. press in 1977, the hitchhiker is a young man, who may have been an innocent victim of the notorious “hanging judge,” Judge Jeffries, or “the spirit of an American serviceman killed in a car crash” (Goss 1984, 64–67).

The third element in concepts of the “bad death” is to be cut off in one’s prime, cheated of the future and the joys it might offer. The archetypical phantom hitchhiker is that archetypical victim, a young, vulnerable, and beautiful girl on the verge of adulthood. This concept comes out most strongly in the versions where the girl has been killed on the way to or from a dance. Though these are not very numerous, I would suggest that this theme implicitly underlies many other Vanishing Hitchhiker stories in its “phantom” form, especially the American ones. Nearly all the stories where the ghost is a girl stress her clothing, which is almost invariably appropriate to a dance—a “lavender evening dress,” a “long gown,” a “black velvet cape,” and so on. (In Britain this theme is more often represented by stories of girls who are killed on the way to their wedding; see, for example, the “Blue Bell Hill” ghost described in Goss 1984, esp. 106–8.)
The fourth element in the picture of modern Western notions about what it means to die badly is the notion of dying alone. Unless they are returning to their graves or on the way to a dance, these ghosts are out on the highway in the hope of getting home. Indeed, the plot often pivots on the ghost giving a specific address where it wants to be taken. Waiting at home, there is always a grieving relative. If postmortem behavior as depicted in ghost stories reliably indicates what sorts of death are to be avoided—and I think it does—then narratives about ghosts who are restless because they died away from home, and which perpetually attempt to reenter the family circle, indicate the importance attached today to not dying alone. Of course, none of these address-giving ghosts ever does get home; every journey is futile. They disappear from the car every time before they can get to their destination. Nevertheless, they never give up trying.

Lastly, I want to suggest that there is a sense in which these stories show that many people in the U.K. and America today implicitly believe that any death is “bad.” These ghosts are totally secular and cannot be fitted into a religious scheme. There is no lesson to be learned by their lives, no moral to be pointed out by their deaths. Nor is there any “place” from which they have returned. Indeed, it would be silly to ask where they have come from. Ghostly hitchhikers are plainly neither in hell nor in heaven. Their heaven was on earth; their hell is that they have been forced precipitately to leave it. Their exemplary characters, and social position as the new father, the bride-to-be, the promising student, or the beautiful girl, are just ways of emphasizing the cruelty of death.

In a sense, then, the underlying assumption of all these stories is that it is death itself that is “bad.” And that may be a distinctly modern point of view.

A Brief History of “Witnesses”

I want to end by returning to the concept of the souls of the dead as “witnesses” of the lives of the living. Witnesses accomplish changes in the mundane world through some form of indirect intervention by means of some sort of communication with the living. In one way this makes them a very traditional form of
revenant; their purposefulness links them, for example, to the interfering and loquacious ghosts of the seventeenth century. But the low-key encounters, the domesticity of the witnesses’ interests, the humdrum little affairs with which they concern themselves—all these seem to cut them off from the ghosts of the “public” tradition.

Conventional ghost stories have a dramatic quality that can be continuously used and reused—as ammunition in philosophical or religious arguments, as motifs in works of art, as entertainment, thrills, and horrors, and as a means of making money. “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend has been used, or may be used, in any of these ways. Such stories therefore turn up time and time again in both educated and popular literature, and in films and TV series. In these media, they are shaped with great skill to make unforgottably impressive accounts that can serve a variety of useful purposes. Though they continue to be folklore, they are also a part of popular and educated culture, and are thus highly visible. “Witnesses” who hide pension books or help paint houses are not a part of this “public” canon. They are much less visible, and they seem far removed both from the purposeful ghosts of the past with their religious or social missions and their potential for menace and from the usual run of ghost stories circulating in the oral tradition. However, before judging that this lively belief is exclusively modern (or, indeed, just an oddity of the folklore of elderly women living in the UK), there are several points which have to be considered. By reading and detective work, the ancestry of quiet and personal purposeful ghosts may be established just as clearly as that of the more visible beliefs (though we should remember that the themes, motifs, and functions of these stories may differ from that of tales about vanishing hitch-hikers or the Cock Lane poltergeists).

Some early impressionistic evidence that the witness type may have a lineage in older folklore is provided by a comparison of the lexis of representative texts. A word list compiled from witness stories in this book shows that the twenty-five terms most frequently used by narrators are (in order of frequency) “dead,” “feel,” “see,” “mother,” “father,” “think,” “say,” “come,” “alive,” “there,” “house,” “plainly,” “happen,” “bedroom,” “bed,” “husband,” “know,” “(a)wake(n),” “night,” “as though,” “tell,” “presence,”
“always,” “help,” and “lost.” This list is surprisingly close to one compiled from John Aubrey’s *Miscellanies* of 1696.

Of all the writers whose works have been discussed here, Aubrey—rambling, discursive, and credulous—is the closest to the folklore of his time; and of his writings, it is the stories in the *Miscellanies* that give the best indication of having been taken verbatim, or almost verbatim, from the mouths of living (and believing) informants. It is significant, therefore, that in this book, the words most frequently used in connection with “apparitions,” “spirits,” and “ghosts” (as he calls them) are “dead,” “bed,” “say,” “saw,” “ask,” “tell,” “(a)wake(n),” “vanish,” “friend,” “wife,” “look,” “appear,” “go,” “come,” “fancy,” “advise,” “alive,” “dream,” “nothing,” “ill,” and “noise.” One-third of the words in the two lists therefore are identical, another six are related (“mother,” “father,” and “husband” reflect female orientations to kinship, “friend” and “wife,” male orientations; the modern phrase “as though he was there” is roughly comparable to the older “fancy that he appeared”; and “help” is not dissimilar to “advise”). Where differences do occur, they are primarily in the degree of the subjectivity or objectivity of the report, rather than the content. Shorn of the elaborations typical of the period, the essence of Aubrey’s old stories is surprisingly similar to that of the modern memorates, the emphasis in both cases being on the presence of the dead person in familiar form, on its being there (and sometimes visible), on the communication with it, and on the cause or result of the encounter. This indicates that many of the assumptions about such visitations have remained surprisingly constant in spite of changes in surface detail, in literary and oral styles, and in cultural climate.

Indeed, four of Aubrey’s stories directly feature apparitions that have strong affinities with the witnesses of modern tradition. One concerns the will of Sir Walter Long of Draycot. On three occasions when a clerk tries to draft a paper which will disinherit her son in favor of the children of Sir Walter’s second marriage, the phantom hand of the first Lady Long is seen hovering reproachfully over the paper. In a second story, the spirit of a dead first wife appears to show the place where the settlement on her children is hidden and thus they gain their inheritance. Here we plainly have the motif of the dead mother still active to protect
those she loved in life. We are really not a far cry from Rachel’s house-painting brother (also concerned about justice for survivors) or Elisabeth’s dead husband (also willing to remind her of the whereabouts of lost documents).

Elsewhere in Aubrey’s collection, we find ghosts who effect cures. Though the surface detail of these stories— weirid strangers, ghosts, recipes, ague—is unfamiliar, the underlying idea that the dead have power to help and cure the living is as evident there as it is in witness traditions. In one of Aubrey’s stories—the truth of which is vouched for by the Archbishop of Canterbury!—an old man is kind to a mysterious stranger dressed in outlandish clothes “not seen or known in those parts” and, in gratitude, the stranger cures his lameness. In another, a ghost appears with an eccentric remedy for ague (to lie on one’s back from ten to one daily). The window dressing is different but the theme is very similar to Ruth’s and Ella’s, perhaps related, accounts in which a “lady in white” comes to a sick child and tells her to get better.

A book written some thirty or forty years after Aubrey’s Miscellanies provides further evidence of the existence of some sort of “witness” tradition in times gone by. In 1729, that great journalist, publicist, and exploiter of popular tastes, Daniel Defoe, under the alias “Andrew Moreton,” was compiling his most famous work on the supernatural, The Secrets of the Invisible World Disclos’d. At the outset, he puts forward the proposition that “almost all real apparitions are of friendly and assisting angels and come of a kind and beneficent Errand” (Defoe 1729, 26). He carefully explains that the mistake in learned thinking is “that we either will allow no apparition at all, or will have every apparition to be of the Devil; as if none of the Inhabitants of the World above, were able to show themselves, or had any Business among us” (ibid, 16). Defoe’s bracketing together of “assisting angels” and the souls of the dead, his talk of “kind and beneficent Errands” and “Inhabitants of the World above” directly reflect the Manchester women’s phraseology about witnesses, and his argument that the dead do indeed “show themselves” here and have “Business among us” is precisely the rationale of their beliefs.

It is difficult to follow the trail of the witness through the rest of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth
century. By the 1730s, educated opinion was firmly set against the concept of supernatural powers and there is a gap in serious writing on the subject from then till at least the turn of the century. One of the best guides to the supernatural folk beliefs of the early nineteenth century is Catherine Crowe’s two-volume compilation of precognitive and ghost experiences, *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848). Mrs. Crowe brings together a massive collection of narratives and a body of theoretical speculation placing traditional texts higgledy-piggledy alongside memorates, family stories, and contemporary rumors. Unusually for the period, her work gives a very clear idea of what were the continuing traditions of the time and what was currently considered to be believable. In her narratives, ghosts can be seen paying debts, revealing murders, and returning because they died with something on their mind, but one of the commonest themes is the return of parents to offer love and comfort.

These ideas continued to appear in some of the better literature in the early decades of the twentieth century (I specially like Giraud 1927; Lewes 1911; and Wood 1936). These texts offer continuing evidence to suggest that ghosts who return out of love for family or home, or in order to serve the interests of their survivors, were a steady feature of the supernatural image at that time.

It is significant that, in his 1959 study of American ghostlore, Louis C. Jones lists one of the five principal types of ghost behavior as warning, consoling, informing, guarding, or rewarding the living. Similarly, a study undertaken in Britain in 1956 by the Society for Psychical Research found that three-quarters of the apparitions they documented had been seen by some person who had a strong personal bond with the dead person (“Six Theories about Apparitions” 1956).

More up-to-date evidence from America can be found in two papers by folklorist Larry Danielson (1979; 1983). Danielson notes that the majority of the apparitions in his study of paranormal memorates culled from archive transcriptions, folklore collections, popular paperbacks, and *Fate* magazine “appear to some person with whom the appearer has some strong emotional bond” (1983, 201). They “are purposeful, most often involved in helpful missions to the living” (ibid, 201), and generally appear when the percipient is “in a critical condition, psychological or physical” (ibid,
Danielson notes that his findings closely correspond with those in analyzed surveys from 1890 to 1962. A final, contingent piece of evidence for traditions of friendly, visiting ghosts comes from Ireland. Among many accounts of frightening apparitions and alarming hauntings in the archive of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Linda-May Ballard reports the following more pleasant belief. The informant explains that:

on . . . Holly Eve [Halloween] you would . . . they used to sweep up the ashes and clean the floor all round, and in near the grate here they would leave a lock of ashes, and smooth it down, and when they came down in the morning they would see the tracks of the feet, where they would be sitting, warming themselves . . . .

Quoting this account, Ballard observes that it blends folk and religious tradition together and appears to be “an act of affection . . . the dead being welcomed into the house” (1981, 29–30).

Each of these bits of information contributes a piece to the jigsaw picture of the friendly witnessing ghost. The Irish account shows dead people returning to their homes and welcomed there; the American surveys indicate the helpfulness of the visitation and the bonds between visitor and visited; Crowe’s stories have all these features; Defoe’s and Aubrey’s earlier writings specify the kinds of errand the dead may carry out in their role as “assisting angels” in the world of the living.

Throughout all the accounts run threads that link the humble witness of modern tradition to the great ghosts of the past—their active purposefulness, their awareness of events transpiring in the earthly domain, and their power for good in the lives of former loved ones. The idea of the “witness” is thus the epitome of a philosophy that sees the creation as whole, ordered, hierarchical, harmonious, and more than a little magical.

“Alas, Poor Ghost!”