Part Two

Explanation

Four

Debating Ghosts

So far ghosts have been discussed as realities, since that is how most people in the past perceived them. Throughout history, though, there has always been debate as to whether they existed. There was a general assumption for much of the period that people really did see external apparitions of humans and animals, but as to whether they were the spirits of the dead was another matter. There were other explanations, both natural and supernatural, which, for religious or scientific reasons, were more or less acceptable to different sections of society at different periods. These questions and suggestions were usually debated as an aspect of broader, fundamental arguments about the fate of the soul, post-biblical providence, the reality of witchcraft and changing philosophical conceptions of the universe. Ghosts flitted through some of the most profound developments in intellectual thought over the last 500 years, and so to discover how they were conceived in the past is to understand how society itself changed.

THE WALKING DEAD

As we have already seen, it was a widespread belief in much of pre-Christian and Christian Europe that the bodies of the dead could emerge from their graves to torment or communicate with the living.[1] It is likely that many of the decapitated, dismembered, staked or weighed down corpses that have been excavated from the prehistoric and Roman periods were treated that way to prevent them from returning to the living. Accounts of the walking dead or *revenants* appear frequently in medieval Scandinavian legends, particularly in the Icelandic sagas, where such a being was called a *draugr*. These usually emerged from their burial mounds at night or during foggy daylight to terrorise the living, though sometimes they could be accommodating. They were best despatched by cutting off their heads or burning them.[2] In southeastern and central Europe the belief in and apparent encounters with the living dead, in the form of the vampire, continued as a vibrant concern into the modern era.

Yet the concept of the walking dead had no place in Christianity. Only God could perform the miracle of resurrection, as Jesus demonstrated to the people of Bethany when he raised the body of Lazarus. The troubled spirit or soul of the dead did not have the power to raise its own body and nor did necromancers. Biblical precedent was one thing, however, and the numerous stories of the walking dead that were recorded in medieval and early modern times were another. So, if the stories were to be believed, then the explanation for so many animated corpses led to only one generally acceptable conclusion – the Devil was up to his tricks. If he could possess the living, as was widely believed and apparently proven by many instances, then there was no reason why he could not possess cadavers for his nefarious purposes. He could, after all, assume ghostly forms, shape-shift and send out his wicked spirits, so it was understandable that he would also animate corpses to strike fear into people's hearts and lure them into sinful assumptions. King James I asserted that the Devil carried bodies out of graves 'to serve his turne for a space', but assured his readers that while

> the Divell may use as well the ministrie of the bodies of the faithfull in these cases, as of the un-faithfull, there is no inconvenient; for his haunting with their bodies after they are dead, can no-waies defyle them: In respect of the soules absence.[3]

These demonic, puppet cadavers were not really ghosts then, but they could fool people into believing that they really were the spirits of the dead. One French writer on the subject thought the Devil's ventriloquial skills were such that it was impossible to distinguish between a talking demon-animated corpse and a living person.[4] Of course the corpse had to be fresh to achieve such an extraordinary deception. The Jesuit François Richard discussed the issue in 1657 in a discourse aimed at confounding French 'atheists'. Richard's views on the subject were influenced by the stories he had heard on his travels in the eastern Mediterranean, and his attendance at the exhumation of a suspected walking dead or 'false revenant'.[5] There was an element of scientific as well as religious belief in his conclusion that, for a brief period after death and the departure of the soul, the corpse remained in a physical state capable of manipulation. The mystic vegetarian Thomas Tryon, writing in the 1690s, further suggested that 'there is some likeness or Relikes of the Spirit remaining in the deceased body so long as it continues moist and full of matter'.[6] As soon as the body began rapidly to putrefy and the main vehicles of the senses, the eyes and nose decayed, however, the soul, the Devil or demons could no longer influence or animate it. It had lost its human principle.

The continental debates regarding the diabolic reanimation of corpses were, however, largely ignored by English intellectuals, which is intriguing considering that the walking dead were prominent in medieval English ghost narratives. The Yorkshire canon William of Newburgh (1136–1198) recorded instances of their activities from Buckinghamshire and Yorkshire. Indeed he considered them to be a contemporary plague, writing that 'it would be extremely tedious' to record all the instances he had heard.[7] He told, for example, how in Buckinghamshire the corpse of a sinner kept returning at night to lie upon his wife in bed. The terrified women asked her family and neighbours to keep watch, which seems to have deterred the dead man. Instead he started to disturb at night the animals owned by the family – 'this was known because of the restlessness and unusual movements of the beasts'. He next began to appear during the day, though 'if it met many people at a time, it was visible to only one or two of them'. The case was reported to the Bishop of Lincoln, who was advised that the usual remedy was to open the grave and cremate the corpse. The bishop found the idea sacrilegious and instead drew up a scroll of absolution, which was placed on the corpse and then reburied. The dead man terrorised the community no more. In another instance from Yorkshire the corpse had its heart taken out, body dismembered and burned. William of Newburgh concluded from the absence of relevant cases in books from former times that the walking dead were a contemporary problem, though he did not know why that should be. William hesitantly plumped for the satanic option in explaining how corpses could walk, though at one point he says he knew 'not what spirit' possessed the bodies.[8] The apparent profusion of such cases would have led an early modern demonologist to conclude that it was a sign of the Devil's increased work in the land, but William evidently did not see the plague of living dead in such a gloomy light.

The collection of Yorkshire ghost sightings reported by a Cistercian monk of Byland Abbey around 1400 present a clearer, orthodox theology for the appearance of the walking dead than the threatening corpses recorded by William.[9] In each of the Byland stories the dead appear explicitly to expiate sins they have committed in life, such as theft or murder. They desire the living to free their souls from purgatory by paying for their sins to be absolved. One reason for this is that the concept of purgatory only really became widely established doctrine during the fourteenth century, providing an alternative to the more problematic satanic theory of reanimation. It is possible that the Byland stories also mark a shift in English popular tradition away from the living dead to the spiritual dead, a shift wrought by the popular inculcation of purgatory. Although in the Byland stories the dead are corporeal and tangible, they are nevertheless referred to by the author as 'spirits' and some of them have

the power of shape-shifting into animal form. While William of Newburgh's living dead were corpses pure and simple, given mechanical motion by means of diabolic or spirit activity, the Byland bodies seem to be imbued with the souls of the dead. Two centuries after the Byland stories were written the concept of the living dead had disappeared completely from the corpus of English popular beliefs regarding the spirit world. The transition towards a more spiritual eschatology of the troubled dead instituted by purgatory was completed by the Reformation emphasis on a spiritual rather than mechanistic preparation for the afterlife.

REFORMATION

The rejection of purgatory was potentially a fatal blow to the theological and popular rationale for ghosts. Early Protestant reformers saw ghosts not only as a pernicious product of a dangerous dogma, but also as the very foundation of purgatory. Through their deceptions and illusions monks and priests had bolstered popular support for their money-making doctrine by faking apparitions.[10] Without purgatory there were no ghosts and without ghosts there was no purgatory. Ghost belief was therefore synonymous with Catholicism. Henry Caesar, vicar of Lostwithiel, Cornwall, was investigated for being a crypto-Catholic in 1584–85 because of his 'belief in spirits and apparitions'. Part of the evidence against him, which he denied, was that Sir Walter Mildmay had conjured up the spirit of Cardinal Pole, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had died in 1558.[11] However, this Reformist equation was unconvincing. After all, purgatory only became orthodox church doctrine during the late medieval period, and ecclesiasts had been questioning the reality of ghosts long before then. Nevertheless, within several decades of the Reformation confident assertions were already being expressed that the popular belief in spirits was in decline following the rejection of purgatory.[12] Archbishop Sandys, for instance, opined that 'the gospel hath chased away walking spirits'. Ghost belief was contentedly consigned to the errors of the Catholic past. Reginald Scot, betraying his usual caution, believed in reports that ghost sightings had ceased in Lutheran German states, and by the time he was writing in 1584, he was evidently confident that with 'the word of God being more free, open and knowne' fewer English people were also being fooled by illusions and false doctrine; perhaps the ghosts were all fleeing to Italy, he mocked.[13] The notion of a Catholic golden age for ghosts was only abandoned during the nineteenth century. Despite the initial confidence in some quarters, however, it was obvious by the mid seventeenth century that

the cleansing properties of the Reformation had not washed away the Catholic stain on the popular consciousness that ghosts were thought to represent. As we shall see, many of the Protestant intelligentsia, as well as the populace, found it impossible to give up the notion that the spirits of the dead returned to the living.

It is rather curious, considering the concerted attack on purgatory by English Protestant reformers, that the subject of ghosts was not a more prominent matter of debate in sixteenth-century England. There was a vast literature on the state of the soul after death but comparatively little on the return of souls amongst the living.[14] The published debate was livelier on the continent, and the only English publications dedicated to the subject were two translations of influential continental treatises.[15] First to appear in 1572 was *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Nyght* by the Swiss reformed pastor Ludwig Lavater. It had been published in Zurich in 1569 and was quickly translated into German, French, Italian and Spanish as well as English. It consisted of a huge collection of ancient, medieval and contemporary instances of ghost sightings, and became the source and template for later collections such as Thomas Bromhall's *A Treatise of Specters* (London, 1658). Lavater set out clearly and in depth the orthodox Protestant theology that it was impossible for the souls of either the faithful or unfaithful to return to earth until the Day of Judgement. He did, however, accept that the weight of historical evidence and learned testimony proved that visions of the dead really did appear to the living. So he set out a range of alternative explanations. Some were hoaxes, some optical illusions, but the most significant message that Lavater wanted to get across was that many supposed ghosts were angelic or, more often, demonic visitations. As one historian has pointed out, though, Lavater's treatise was not so much a doctrinal polemic as a work of pastoral instruction.[16] He recognised that it was one thing to destroy the foundations of purgatory but another task to relieve people of the fear of the spirits of the dead.

Catholic as well as Protestant theologians appreciated Lavater's work. Although they obviously did not agree with his religious principles there were two areas of common ground. First, the acceptance that some, even many hauntings were fakes, and, second, that the Devil imitated the spirits of the dead for his nefarious purposes. Both these points were evident in an influential Catholic response to Lavater's treatise by the French Capuchin Noel Taillepied. In his *Psichologie ou traité de l'apparition des esprits* (Paris, 1588) Taillepied argued with simple casuistry that the Devil's resort to mimicking the spirits of the dead was proof itself of the reality of ghosts. For if the spirits of the dead did not return occasionally to the living, 'evil Spirits would not adopt this ruse, since it would be idle and vain'. The Devil pretended to be a ghost,

'because he knows that ghosts actually appear to men'.[17] Taillepied's work was not translated into English at the time and seems to have made little impact. This was not necessarily because he was arguing from a Catholic perspective. English demonological writers were happy to mine Catholic continental texts if it furthered their arguments about the iniquity of witchcraft. In this context *A Treatise of Specters* by the French lawyer Pierre Le Loyer proved more influential. The Puritan divine Richard Bernard, for instance, used cases from Le Loyer's *Treatise* as evidence of the various devilish activities of witches in his influential *Guide to Grand-Jury Men* (1627).

A Treatise of Specters was, in fact, the first major Catholic counterblast against Lavater, having been published two years before Taillepied's tome, but the first part of the book only appeared in an English version in 1605. There was a pragmatic reason for the timing of its publication. Le Loyer apparently desired to stay in England and was seeking royal protection. His translator Zachary Jones therefore used the English translation to plead his cause, appealing to King James's preoccupation with the witch threat. He recommended Le Loyer as 'a stoute and most worthie Champion' in the fight against the 'diabolicall illusions of Witches, Sorcerers and Conjurers'.[18] From a commercial point of view, Le Loyer's *Treatise* also tapped into the zeitgeist of growing Puritan influence and concern over the ineffectual progress of the campaign against witchcraft. Witch trials had reached a peak in the 1580s and 1590s with nearly 300 recorded prosecutions.[19] But for Puritan theologians such as William Perkins, those tried represented only a tiny portion of the diabolic scum they believed polluted the country. The Puritan clergy also fostered a greater theological emphasis on the threat of demonic spirit influence in human affairs, which was reflected in the 1604 statute against witchcraft and conjuration. Indeed, Zachary Jones praised the King's campaign against witches – 'the generation of Vipers, and the seede of the wicked Serpent: whose head you have also bruised, both by divine lawe, and by Act of Parliament'.

It is important, of course, not to assume that the lack of English publications reflected a lack of intellectual interest. It is likely, for example, that lively public debates took place amongst university students and dons.[20] The only English treatise dedicated to ghosts, though never published, was based on a 'semi-public' lecture on the subject given by the clergyman Randall Hutchins (1567–1603) when a student in Oxford, probably in the late 1580s. He recalled a few years later that no subject 'pleased me more than that of specters'.[21] Hutchins' main authorities were the works of the ancients, but Lavater inspired his interest in the subject. He described him as a gifted man but criticised him for relying on the accumulation of examples as a form of discourse – 'a feeble kind of disputation', he said – rather than arguing from 'firm reason.'[22] Hutchins

distilled the essence of Lavater's arguments, explaining the different types of spirits that could 'take on bodies easily perceptible to sight'. He concluded that 'the Devil has not only impiously fabricated that whole doctrine of the wandering ghosts of the dead, but also iniquitously augmented it'.[23]

By rejecting Catholic doctrine on the afterlife Protestant theologians sought to conceptualise alternative theories of the soul's existence. What happened to souls up until the Day of Judgement? The debates that ensued were at times as vitriolic as the Protestant denunciations of Catholic doctrine, and allowed plenty of scope for ghosts to retain theological pertinence. One of the main threats to their existence came from mortalism; in other words, the idea that the soul either slept or died until Judgement Day.[24] This obviously precluded the return of the spirits of the dead. The notion had circulated during the early centuries of Christianity, and had been condemned by the likes of Origen and Augustine, but it gained widespread support during the early decades of the Reformation. Luther was sympathetic to the idea. However, because some radical Reformers enthusiastically propounded it, it was dropped or diluted by mainstream Protestantism. The concept of ghosts or soul walkers could even be upheld as a means of highlighting the heretical error of mortalism. As we shall see, it was such tensions between different facets of Protestant theology that gave ghosts their remarkable intellectual longevity.

The weight of evidence was obviously an important defence for the existence of ghosts, but the ultimate authority on all matters spiritual was the Bible. Yet Protestant defenders of ghosts found it difficult to draw definite conclusions from its words. When the Independent minister Isaac Watts (1674–1748) sought to draw biblical support for the reality of ghosts, his efforts were remarkably tentative. 'The Scripture seems to mention such sort of Ghosts or Appearances of Souls departed', he observed. Referring to the passage in Luke Act xxiii, verse 9, where some Pharisees ask, 'What if a Spirit or an angel hath spoken to this man?', Watts concluded, 'A Spirit here is plainly distinct from an Angel, and what can it mean but an Apparition of a human Soul which has left the body?'[25] This was clutching at straws and such claims for divine backing could easily be swatted away by the sceptics. The biblical defence had to rest on the story of the raising of the prophet Samuel, which, as we have seen, had been a source of controversial debate since the founding of the Christian church. The Reformation failed to seal the matter. While the diabolic deception thesis was certainly the majority position amongst English intellectuals, some still clung to the raising of Samuel as proof that the souls of the dead could return. So eager was he to prove the existence of the spirit world that Joseph Glanvill stuck his head above the parapet on this most contentious of biblical issues and defended the literal reading of the passage. 'Now if it were the Real

Samuel,' he explained, 'as the Letter expresseth, (and the obvious sense is to be followed when there is no cogent Reason to decline it) he was not raised by the Power of the Witches Inchantments, but came on that occasion in a Divine Errand.'[26] By the 1670s this was an isolated position even among ghost defenders. It smacked of Catholicism, with one pamphlet complaining that 'the Jesuits affirme Samuels reall resuscitation, bewitching the vulgars to believe that the dead appeare out of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory'.[27] Yet Glanvill's willingness shows how Protestantism failed to shake off what had been widely castigated as a Catholic deception. As Peter Marshall neatly puts it, the Reformation turned ghosts into 'illegal immigrants' across a supposedly impermeable boundary.[28] They should not exist, but they evidently did. They were deeply problematic but continued to serve a theological and moral purpose.

THE DEVIL?

From the Elizabethan period onwards the Catholic threat from both abroad and within remained an ever-present concern. The authorities were watchful of the activities of crypto-Catholics and Jesuits, and the clergy and the church courts struggled to root out Catholic practices employed by the laity. Still, the country was not wracked by the confessional tensions and intense propaganda battle that permeated the main confessional battlegrounds of central and northern Europe. Consequently ghosts had less of a prominent role to play in English theological polemic. Issues regarding ghosts did, however, permeate the most pressing religious concern in Elizabethan and Stuart England – witchcraft.[29] While ghosts continued to serve a didactic purpose, highlighting the deceptions of priests and monks, it was the ghost as diabolic illusion that was the main issue of debate. Ghostly apparitions were confirmation of Puritan fears. The frequency with which the Devil confronted people with apparitions of the dead was further proof, if it were needed, of the pervasive activities of his principal agents, witches and cunning-folk. Even true ghosts could be appropriated to the anti-witch cause. Those sceptics, like the Elizabethan gentleman Reginald Scot, who challenged the reality of witchcraft, did so as part of a broader rejection of spiritual intervention in human affairs. If it could be proved that ghosts existed, then it would undermine the sceptics' bases for rejecting the idea of diabolic witchcraft.

Yet those who believed both *in* ghosts and that the Devil masqueraded *as* ghosts were confronted with a serious diagnostic problem. How to tell one from the other? The awkwardness of the quandary is clear from the hotchpotch collections of supernatural 'Relations' in defence of spirits produced during

the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of the cases were stated to concern 'spirits', but what sort of spirits was often left unresolved, presumably because of the difficulty of determining whether manifestations were the work of witches, devils, fairies or ghosts. Joseph Glanvill's definition of a spirit encapsulates this lack of clarity. A spirit was, he said, an 'intelligent Creature of the invisible World', which could be either an evil angel or a devil, 'an inferior daemon, or a wicked soul departed'.[30] Now consider Richard Baxter's diagnosis of the experience of a dissolute London gentleman of his acquaintance. Upon awakening from his drunken slumbers, he would hear something knocking on his bedhead; the noise would then follow him around the house. Other members of the household also heard it. Suspecting he was playing a trick, his brother held his hands but the knocks continued. His wife, whilst watching him, saw his shoes under the bed move by an invisible hand. For Baxter the noises were clearly a providential warning to the drunkard about his sinful ways, but what spiritual messenger had God employed?

> It poseth me to think what kind of Spirit this is, that hath such a Care of this Man's Soul, (which maketh me hope he will recover.) Do good Spirits dwell so near us? Or are they sent on such Messages? Or is it his Guardian Angel? Or is it the Soul of some dead Friend, that suffereth, and yet, retaining Love to him … God yet keepeth such things from us in the dark.[31]

It would seem that amongst the educated classes, first-hand experiences were just as difficult to resolve. The astrologer and merchant Samuel Jeake (1652–1699), son of a Nonconformist preacher, wrote in his diary of his puzzlement regarding the following strange encounter. He had stayed in a room where the bedstaff kept being mysteriously moved around as he slept. Others sleeping in the same chamber had reported similar 'like trifles'. Jeake confided:

> This seemed somewhat strange; & being pretty well satisfied; that none of the family were concerned in it, I cannot yet resolve it into any other Cause, than the ridiculous & trifling actions of some of the meanest rank among the Infernal Spirits.[32]

The Oxford don Robert Burton had no doubt in 1621 that 'Divells many times appeare to men, & afright them out of their wits sometimes walking at noone day, sometimes at nights, counterfeiting dead means ghosts'.[33] The Northamptonshire physician John Cotta (c. 1575–1650) saw no reason to doubt that the Devil could create such natural illusions, so that when people saw apparitions their eyes were not deceiving them. Satan's deception lay in

fooling people that the apparitions really were ghosts. Cotta pointed out that mirrors could create 'outward shapes, and figures of creatures and substances', while painters could 'represent perfectly the true and lively shape of men, and other creatures, even when they are not onely absent, and removed in farre distant places, but when oft-times they have many yeares beene swallowed of the grave'.[34] If man could recreate physical representations of the dead on flat surfaces then it was quite conceivable that the Devil could use the atmosphere as his canvas. His exceeding knowledge of nature enabled him to manipulate the corruption and condensation of air. Rainbows were cited as evidence of how the atmosphere could assume form and colour. Clouds also formed recognisable shapes so why could not the Devil create physical representations – not out of thin air maybe, but certainly out of heavy air. Evil spirits were themselves invisible, but they could cloth themselves in such aerial garments and so become visible to the human eye.[35]

Yet, if apparitions of the dead were the work of the Devil, then why was it that they often appeared to the living to right wrongs and identify murderers? The Presbyterian minister John Flavell (c. 1630–1691) thought hard on this conundrum. He accepted that God may sometimes send back the souls of the dead 'to evidence against the *Atheism* of men', but in general believed that the vast majority of ghosts were evil angels. The Devil, in the guise of a ghost, engaged in good causes, he concluded, because it was 'certainly his interest to precipitate wicked men, and hasten their ruine by the hand of Justice: and he will speak the truth, and seem to own a righteous cause to bring about his great design of ruining the Souls and Bodies of men'.[36] This was unacceptable reasoning to some. While St Paul had observed in Corinthians that the Devil could disguise himself as an angel of light, if he went around the world serving justice it would be impossible to tell the providential from the diabolic. The schoolmaster and polemicist John Webster (1611–1682), best known for his scepticism regarding witchcraft and physical diabolic relations, asserted that the Devil and his evil angels were 'not Authors of any good either Corporeal or Spiritual, apparent or real'.[37] From studying several cases where he believed apparitions of the dead had truly uncovered murders and identified murderers, he concluded that there could be only two solutions. As he did not believe in ghosts, the apparitions must have been wrought either by divine power or by the 'astral spirit' of the dead.[38] The latter was the Neoplatonic concept, espoused by Paracelsus in particular, that there were three essential components of Man: the body, soul and 'a middle substance, betwixt the Soul and the Body' that hovered around the corpse. This astral spirit consisted of matter but took longer to decompose than the body. It also preserved the 'thoughts, cogitations, desires and imaginations that were impressed upon the mind at the time of

death'.[39] Hence to the percipient it conveyed the horror and cause of death of the last moments of a murder victim. As someone who rejected so much of Neoplatonic thought on spirits, Webster was unconformable with astral spirits, but at the same time he could find no other 'rational' explanation for the apparitions of the murdered.

Although he accepted the possibility of divine intervention Webster rejected the idea that ghostly apparitions were good angels come to minister divine justice on God's behalf. He saw no scriptural justification for such angelic intervention and found no proof of any examples from human experience. Yet, if the Devil was to be discounted, and few did so prior to the late seventeenth century, and astral spirits remained unconvincing, then good angels provided the only theologically acceptable solution to the reality of the apparitions of the murdered. As Daniel Defoe concluded:

> What Apparitions have been, have certainly been of those blessed Angelick Spirits, who may so far have concern'd themselves in some Cases of Violence, Opression, manifest and atrocious Frauds, to alarm the Offenders, and thereby bring them to do Right.[40]

NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

From the mid seventeenth century scientists and philosophers across Europe, both Catholic and Protestant, began to challenge the existence of ghosts not only through theological reasoning, but also on the basis of new conceptions of the constituents and workings of the world. Neoplatonism, founded on the principal of spiritual governance, came under attack and new philosophical ideas threatened to blow away *all* the spiritual explanations for the apparitions of the dead. One of the key destabilising influences was cartesianism. The French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650) said little directly on the subject of ghosts, but his concept of a world consisting only of matter meant there was little room for spirits. It was the antithesis of Neoplatonism. Everything visible and invisible consisted of particles or corpuscles that acted in relationship to each other but which could not be influenced at a distance. The world and everything in it worked through a mechanical sequence of consequential material motions, hence the idea of a clockwork universe that was later developed by the likes of Isaac Newton. The mind, too, was a substance though different from corporeal matter. Soul and body were separate entities, though in humans God had allowed a special relationship between the two. Yet the soul could only express itself within a living human body. Outside of

the body, to which God had ordained its existence, it could exert no influence over matter.

Cartesian thought did not take root as strongly in English intellectual circles as it did elsewhere in Western Europe. Yet his ideas certainly influenced Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), one of the most radical and original English philosophers. He was the first to make an absolute break with the old Reformation discourse on ghosts by basing his scepticism of spirits not only on common sense and theological inconsistency, but also on ideas of natural philosophy pushed to the extreme. For him there was no uneasy balance to maintain between attacking Catholic doctrine and upholding a belief in the supernaturalism of the Bible. In his controversial book *Leviathan* (1651) he was categorical that *all* ghosts were mere fancies, deceits, the product of fearful dreams or a troubled conscience.[41] It was impossible for the soul to assume shape or motion. This was tantamount to saying that the soul did not exist, and, not surprisingly, intellectual support was not immediately forthcoming for this radical materialist stance. Hobbes was accused of being a heretic by some and an atheist by others. *Leviathan* was refused further publication. Although he was initially intellectually isolated, his views on ghosts and witches were to influence a new, more contentious debate about the extent to which materialism was compatible with Christianity. To cast doubt on the reality of the spirits of the dead was to question the reality of the soul, and consequently the very foundations of Christianity; over the next century, cries of atheism showered down on those who doubted the reality of ghosts.

Atheism, which was a term applied broadly to those who propounded a range of unorthodox views regarding established theology, had become an increasing concern during the second half of the seventeenth century.[42] Church court records show that a variety of sceptical positions were certainly held by the laity, and it was not unusual for the faith of Puritans to have been reinforced by moments of religious doubt attributed to diabolic inspiration.[43] There are, however, few recorded expressions of atheism in the modern sense of someone who rejects the existence of God. There is no doubt, though, that questioning voices were multiplying, particularly during the religious and political foment of the Civil War and Interregnum period. Richard Baxter warned, 'There are in this City of London, many Persons that profess their great unbelief, or doubt of the Life to come.'[44] Yet the fear of absolute unbelief far exceeded the reality. The concerns can be seen more as a response to the increasing influence of a rationalist approach to religion, which began to strip away the miracles, wonders and revelations of the Old and New Testaments to uncover a rational basis of Christianity. This was not a rejection of God and his works, but an attempt to found Christianity on Reason and science. For some this was

the slippery slope to irreligion and those who espoused it were denounced as crypto-atheists, too afraid to utter what they really believed. As Glanvill asseverated, 'those that dare not bluntly say, *There is NO God*, content themselves (for a fair step and Introduction) to deny there are *SPIRITS, or WITCHES*'. He was relieved to say that such people were few and far between amongst the 'vulgar', but warned that they were numerous amongst the 'looser Gentry' and 'the small pretenders to *Philosophy* and *Wit*'.[45]

Scepticism regarding spirits was not only symptomatic of atheism, however, but as Thomas Bromhall warned in his *Treatise of Spectres* (1658), it also led to 'iniquity, impiety, and dissolute living'.[46] The author of the *Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton* (1683), which concerned the 'apparition or spectrum' of a dead gentleman and his wife in Devon, agreed that disbelievers 'were capable of no higher enjoyments than the sickly pleasures of a sensual Life; whilst with Torrents of Intemperate and Libidinous Debauches, they overwhelm their pampered and deluded selves'.[47] So the blasphemy of atheism undermined not only religion but also the moral values of society. Ghost-belief provided a spiritual bulwark against this incipient libertinism. 'Hear ye Sons of the Atheistical *Leviathan*, and let the Impenetrable Off-spring of Chance and Atomes, give attention!' thundered the *Narrative of the Demon of Spraiton*. 'How long shall your Impious Incredulity Brave the Power of the Almighty … Where are your Hobbs's, your Scots, your Websters, with their Blasphemous denials of the Existence of Spirits.'[48]

Decade by decade, though, sceptics of varying degrees in relation to the founding positions of the likes of Scot, Hobbes and Descartes, began to chip away at the intellectual underpinning for the existence of ghosts and spiritual intervention more generally. But as historians of witchcraft have shown, the struggle was not a simplistic one between science and religion, between rationalism and supernaturalism.[49] Adherents to some aspects of mechanical philosophy, such as Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and Thomas Browne, continued to propound the concept of the immortal soul and that it could, with God's permission and help, influence matter and, therefore, assume substantial form. To this end the likes of Glanvill, Bromhall and Baxter sought to bolster the defence of the reality of the spirit world through the sheer weight of personal testimony gathered from respectable friends, acquaintances, and the confessions of accused witches. Glanvill averred that it gave him 'no humour nor delight in telling Stories, and do not publish these for the gratification of those that have … I record them as *Arguments* for the confirmation of a Truth.' Those who denied the Truth – the existence of the spirit world and therefore the whole basis of providential Christianity – he denounced as 'nullibists'. These he described variously as the 'multitudes of brisk confident Men in our days', the 'Huffers

and Witlings', whose rational faculties had been distorted by Cartesianism, and who 'boldly affirm that a *Spirit* is *Nullibi*, that is to say, *Nowhere*'.[50]

One of the headiest defences for the existence of ghosts was propounded by the astrologer and occultist John Heydon (1629–c.1670). Heydon's views were characteristic of what one historian has described as the 'fertile and chaotic intellectual milieu' of the times.[51] The widely-read Heydon tacitly recognised elements of corpuscular theory but diffused them within an all-embracing Neoplatonic notion of the universe. His conception of ghosts was further influenced by his own personal experiences of various denizens of the spirit world, such as the strange 'aerial men' who visited him in 1648, and intimated they could live for several hundred years. In 1656 Heydon married the widow of the renowned astrologer-physician Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654), whose ghost had visited her, 'bidding her vindicate him, for he was abused by some *Booksellers*'.[52] Culpeper's spirit also apparently produced a document addressed to his readership for the same purpose, which was published in 1656 as *Mr Culpeper's Ghost*. The author of its preface, Peter Cole, was not sure as to how the ghost had produced the manuscript, commenting: 'whether he delivered all this in an Apparition; or whether Spirits can write, and so he wrote it to some Friend of his, that will not be known, for fear he should be counted a Conjurer, and one that had familiarity with Spirits? I will not determine.' At any rate, Heydon cited the publication as proof that 'these Apparitions are really the souls of the Deceased'.[53]

Heydon criticised those who presented ghosts or 'unbodied Souls' as largely devoid of substance, and therefore possessors of a 'dubious transparency'. He dismissed such descriptive terms as 'shades' or metaphors likening them to the reflection in a mirror. Such notions suggested that the substance of souls were lost when released from the body, as if 'nothing but a tenuous reek remains, no more in proportion to us, than what a sweating Horse leaves behinde him, when he Gallops by in a frosty morning'. Surely God had ordained a more substantial existence for the soul? They may have had an aerial existence but the air, thought Heydon, was just as thick with matter as a cup of water. Ghosts, therefore, were actually solid entities that had a sense of touch, and Heydon furthered that it was 'a very hard thing to disprove that they have not something analogicall to Smell and Taste'.[54] Knowing Heydon's occult interests, espousal of Rosicrucian mysticism, and extraordinary spiritual experiences, it would be easy to dismiss his views on ghosts as the product of an isolated, eccentric mind. True, he was for various personal and pragmatic reasons, considered as an outsider by some of his contemporary occultists. Yet this staunch monarchist was no radical sectarian, and his conception of the spirit world should be seen not only as a product of the occult experimentation of the period but as part

of the defence of providential religion espoused by more orthodox figures like Glanvill.

Even for those who rejected Neoplatonism and worked within an explicitly Cartesian intellectual framework, it was possible to construct arguments confirming the existence of a spirit world. This is just what several Dutch clergymen attempted to do during the late seventeenth century, though they were primarily interested in bolstering the principle of angelic intervention rather than the more problematic belief in ghosts.[55] Those who held the torch for theological Cartesianism, such as the Dutch pastor Balthasar Bekker were ultimately unable to go as far as Hobbes and reject entirely the reality of the spirit world.[56] Bekker endorsed Descartes's separation of spirit and matter, and therefore could find no rational explanation for how the souls of the dead could appear in a corpuscular world. Even if it were possible, they certainly could not have any influence in earthly affairs. Popular sightings of ghosts could be put down to natural causes such as dreams, frauds, over-vivid imaginations and melancholy. However, his acceptance of the reality of angels, based on biblical precedent, allowed that what people thought were the spirits of the dead may possibly, occasionally, have been angelic visions – though he did not actually say as much.

Bekker's work provoked considerable controversy, primarily in the Netherlands but also amongst French and German theologians.[57] Its reception in England was fairly muted though. An abridged English edition of Bekker's volumes on the subject, *The World Bewitch'd*, was published in 1695, but the only significant response to it was from John Beaumont (c. 1640–1731), a Somerset gentlemen and member of the Royal Society. On reading the complete French edition of Bekker's work, Beaumont had been provoked into contacting acquaintances in the Netherlands asking 'for all that was Writ against him, and any Reply's he had made'.[58] He was disappointed by the poor response he received, but it seems to have spurred him to provide his own detailed rebuttal of Bekker's views in his *Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcrafts*, published in 1705. A cursory reading of Beaumont's defence of the spirit world suggests it was written in the same vein as the ghost-believing natural philosophers of the previous generation, like Glanvill. However, it differed in two significant ways. First, Beaumont's views, like John Heydon's, were influenced by the profound personal experience he had of spirit communications. While Glanvill, Baxter and the like may have claimed to witness spirit manifestations, they were rarely singled out for personal attention. In a second publication nearly 20 years later, Beaumont remarked:

> I know many Persons laugh at all Apparitions; and it's not for those I record these things, but for those to whom such *Genii* may appear; who, as they will be much surprised at the first Sight of them, I know will be glad to find that others have had the like Experiences.[59]

A second point of difference is that Beaumont's defence of the spirit world was not intended to bolster the witch trials, which had practically ceased by the time. He certainly cited numerous accounts of spirit activity and familiars from the seventeenth-century trials in England and New England in support of his arguments, but he also showed a healthy scepticism. He posited that those who *confessed* to witchcraft were likely to have imagined their diabolic exploits during 'extatick Dreams', but 'for want of Judges knowing in this mysterious State of Mind', such people had 'been barbarously prosecuted and murthered, even to the Ridicule of Mankind'.[60] In this sense Beaumont's work marked a significant shift in the English ghost debate by uncoupling it from the discourse on witchcraft. The reality of ghosts became a separate theological issue positioned more comfortably within the debate over providence, thereby extending the intellectual shelf-life of ghosts. It was this separation from the witchcraft controversy that helped give Beaumont's *Treatise* a welcome reception on the continent. It was published in German in 1721 with a supportive preface by Christian Thomasius, a leading Protestant jurist whose work attacking the use of torture and the flimsy evidential basis of many witchcraft prosecutions helped to undermine the witch trials. Although Thomasius and Bekker are often cited together in this respect, the former was no Cartesian. Like Beaumont, he accepted that the Devil could exert a spiritual influence over people, and that magicians could manipulate occult forces to do harm, but rejected the possibility of a physical Devil. What they shared was the principle of the absolute state of God's control over the world, which the concept of diabolic witchcraft – disseminated, they said, by the papacy – seemed to threaten.[61]

THE 'VEGETABLE PHŒNIX'

The complexities of the seventeenth-century debates on spirits, and the ambiguities of some of the scientific endeavours to explain ghosts, are well illustrated by a curious and rather neglected episode in the history of science. Some scientists hoped that uncovering the mysteries of the natural world through experimentation could lead to the revelation of the greatest miracle of them all – the resurrection of the dead. But taking the Devil and his tricks out of the equation and trying to provide a natural explanation smacked

dangerously of heresy. The seekers after the secret were careful to argue that they were attempting to reveal how God's divine intervention could be effected by natural processes. They were in no way trying to undermine the fundamental basis of Christian spirituality by suggesting that mankind could emulate God's miracles.

In a talk to the Society for Promoting Philosophical Knowledge by Experiments in 1660, the occult scientist Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665), told his audience:

> if I prove that there is no repugnance against the feasibility of it, I am confident I shall not misse of hearty thanks from those sincere believers who have nothing to shake the firmnesse of their Faith, but the suspected impossibility of the Mystery.[62]

Digby's proof concerned a series of experiments in which he believed he had succeeded in regenerating new crayfish from the ashes of deceased ones. He washed some crayfish, boiled them for at least two hours, and then made a distillation of the resulting liquor. The bodies of the crayfish were next reduced to ashes in an oven and the 'salts' extracted. The salty residue was then mixed with the liquor and left 'to putrifie' in a moist place. Within a few days tiny little animals appeared out of the mix, which he fed on ox blood until they had grown to the size of a button. Over the next few weeks he grew them on to full-sized crayfish by rearing them in a bucket of river water and ox blood, which he changed every third day.[63] We may now laugh at Digby's deluded scientific revelation, but it was based on his knowledge of decades of previous experimentation by continental scientists.[64] Rumour had it that years earlier a French chemist named de Claves had regenerated the form of a sparrow by burning its ashes in a flask.[65] However, most experiments, at least those that were claimed to be successful, were conducted on the ashes of plants. Digby had consulted an international network of scientific showmen on the matter, such as the famed Jesuit Athanasius Kircher in Rome and the Scottish chemist Dr William Davisson (c. 1593–1669), who was based in Paris and Poland.[66] They assured him that they had achieved the resurrection of plants, though Digby admitted 'no industry of mine could effect it'.[67]

This alchemical science of resurrection, known as palingenesis, was based on the Doctrine of Signatures. In the medieval period this meant that the outward appearance of certain herbs and animals, for instance, had been deliberately shaped by God to indicate their harmony and sympathy with parts of the human body. Many herbal remedies were based on this principle. The alchemical scientists of the seventeenth century, influenced by Paracelsus,

took the doctrine in a new direction by arguing that such sympathies were also inherent in the microcosmic, internal essences of all living things.[68] One could destroy and break down living matter through heat, reduce it to its elementary substances and then, through chemical processes, recreate the original form because its signature was encoded in its fundamental constituents. As one of its enthusiastic supporters, the Cartesian abbé de Vallemont, put it, 'when a Body is destroy'd, pull'd to pieces, and reduc'd into Ashes, we find again in the Salts, extracted from its Ashes, the Idea, the Image, and the Phantom of the same Body'.[69]

So, in the secrets of palingenesis lay the key to the existence of ghosts. It seemed to prove that people saw what they saw – an image of the dead. But they did not argue that it *was* the soul of the dead, but rather the simulacrum of the deceased encapsulated in the essential constituents of the body, and released as vapours and exhalations by the chemical breakdown of the putrefying corpse. The French chemist James Gaffarel, whose work, *Unheard-of Curiosities*, was translated into English in 1650 by the respected polymath and musician Edmund Chilmead, concluded from such experiments:

> The Ghosts of Dead Men, which are often seen to appeare in Church-yards, are Naturall Effects, being only the Formes of the Bodies, which are buried in those places; or their Outward shapes, or Figures; and not the Souls of those Men, or any such like Apparition, caused by Evill Spirits.

He went on to point out that 'in Armies, where, by reason of their great numbers, many die, you shall see some such Ghosts very often, (especially after a Battell)'. The reason being that, as with the heating of plant ashes in a vial, the 'figures' of human bodies were 'raised up, partly by an Internall Heat, either of the Body, or of the Earth: or else by some Externall one, as that of the Sun, or of the Multitudes of the Living: or, by the Violent Noise, or Heat of great Guns, which puts the Aire into a Heat'.[70] De Vallemont agreed with Gaffarel's conclusion, but his acceptance of it would seem to contradict the conclusions he drew from Digby's experiments with crayfish, in which living physical matter was regenerated. Indeed the abbé salivated at the prospect of farming these tasty morsels by such means, affirming that they had 'an excellent Virtue to purifie the Blood'.[71] But such apparent inconsistencies could easily be argued away by the palingenesists. Thus Digby decided, 'I cannot allow Plants to have Life.' They had no 'principle of motion within them', he said. Consequently, though a plant's likeness could be reproduced via palingenesis, it was not a true resurrection because the plant 'never was at any time a determinate It, or *Thing*'.[72] In the great scheme of things it was recognised that plants were not

animals and crayfish were obviously not men, yet maybe future experimentation would reveal that the same laws of nature applied. De Vallemont speculated that natural philosophers 'would at length carry their Experiments so far, as to arrive at the Incomprehensible Mystery of the Resurrection'.[73]

He was wrong of course. The results of alchemical palingenesis were nothing but wishful thinking shaped by what proved to be a false scientific framework. Robert Boyle (1627–1691), the renowned experimental scientist and natural philosopher, was initially intrigued but found the theory wanting. 'I much fear', he wrote, 'that most of those that tell us that they have seen such plants … have in that discovery made as well use of their Imagination as of their Eyes.'[74] Still, despite such an eminent rebuttal, those natural philosophers seeking arguments to undermine the popular belief in ghosts during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries could not but help appropriate palingenesis to their cause. John Webster referred to the experiments of Kircher and others as evidence against direct spirit intervention in human affairs. It was 'not only possible, but rational,' he decided, 'that animals as well as plants, have their Ideas or Figures existing after the gross body or parts be destroyed, and so these apparitions are but only those Astral shapes and figures'.[75] Likewise, at the end of the century, the physician and occultist Ebenezer Sibly provided detailed instructions on how to reproduce the 'simple spirit' of plants. The experiment demonstrated that 'in the simple operations of nature many wonderful things are wrought, which, upon a superficial view appear impossible, or else to be the work of the devil'.[76]

Even if one accepted the possibility of palingenesis there were too many limitations for it to succeed as a general explanation for ghost sightings. The astral apparitions generated were physically linked to the corpses they mirrored, and, therefore, could only be found in close proximity to the dead – as in churchyards, crossroads and battlefields. Palingenesis could not explain haunted houses and wandering ghosts, which made up the bulk of sightings over the centuries. Neither could it account for spirits that could speak or had sentient powers such as pointing or moving objects. The palingenesists over reached themselves yet there was something admirable in their quest.

HAUNTING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Writing in 1750, the physician and chemist Peter Shaw confidently observed that 'Ghosts and Witches, at present, rarely make their Appearance. A better Natural Philosophy has laid these Spirits, and quieted our Church-Yards; where the Ghosts of the Deceased used to frolic and gambol, like Rats in a Cellar.'[77] Such

confidence was typical of the proponents of eighteenth-century rationalism. Around the same time, the writer William Shenstone stated with satisfaction that 'it is remarkable how much the belief of ghosts and apparitions of persons departed, has lost ground within these fifty years'. 'They have not been reported to have appeared these twenty years', he furthered.[78] They evidently knew little of the beliefs of the common people, and seemed to turn a deliberate blind eye to the continued belief in spirits amongst their social equals. It is true that by the eighteenth century the intellectual tide had turned against Neoplatonism and the conception of a spirit-infused universe. Several key aspects of Christian spiritualism, such as the reality of witchcraft, physical diabolic manifestations and the continuance of miracles, were difficult to incorporate into a materialist world. Rationalist scepticism was, however, by no means the clear victor. The emerging orthodoxy was subtler than an outright rejection of the long-held conceptions of divine revelation and satanic interference. The new mainstream view on witchcraft, for instance, was not that witchcraft was an impossibility, but rather that witches *no longer* existed. More to the point, ghosts weathered the changing intellectual climate remarkably well.

Ghosts may not have had the same explicit biblical justification as witchcraft, but the huge weight of historic evidence remained a powerful argument. Furthermore, reports of hauntings continued to pour forth from all social levels. As one anonymous clergyman wrote, 'almost every village in England can produce recent and undeniable proofs of these supernatural visitations, permitted by providence, for the discovery of truth; the exposition of some horrid crime, or as warnings to impious and guilty persons'.[79] So while the intellectual relevance of witchcraft withered, ghosts maintained their grip on educated thought throughout the scientific and philosophical transformations of the period. Scepticism remained a dirty word, and the public rejection of spirits could still attract a chorus of religious disapproval. Peter Shaw was evidently sensitive to this and felt the need to strike a note of caution. 'We of the present Age', he observed, 'should take Care lest, by hastily running from Superstition, we fall not at once into Scepticism and Irreligion.'[80]

While the concerns regarding the growth of true atheism were largely unfounded, those over deism were more justified. Most deists expounded the idea that God had detached himself from the world once he had created it, and henceforth had not interfered in human affairs. He had given humans the faculty of reason and therefore the means to comprehend the world, to understand their place in it and to find the path to true faith. The supposed miracles and supernatural happenings in the Bible could be explained away by science and reason. Deism was, then, an explicit affirmation of natural as opposed to providential religion. There was no place for heavenly or hellish

spirit intermediaries. Ghosts, as deists such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon stated, were mere delusions brought on by dreams, opium, drink, disordered spleens and weak minds.[81] Such deistic anti-providential views had been floating around since the Reformation.[82] It was only during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, that it became a distinct and flourishing force, due in part to the eroding authority of the Church of England, but also because it drew inspiration from the profound scientific and philosophical developments of the period.

Just as the perceived threat of the materialists had acted as a rallying point for those who saw the spirit world as a pillar supporting the edifice of Christianity, so several decades later deism provoked a resurgent defence of spirits against the perceived forces of unbelief, lending ghosts renewed theological respectability and purpose.[83] The clergyman and prolific pamphleteer William Assheton (1642–1711), writing in 1706, asserted: 'That there are Spirits and Incorporeal Beings, is no less certain than that there are Men. None but a Sadducee or an Atheist will pretend to deny it.' Another clergyman asserted that 'A person who looks upon the stories of ghosts and spectres as fabulous, must, I think, be an atheist or a deist.' True Christians could not deny the reality of such apparitions.[84] One ghost defender challenged the 'redoubtable philosophers to go through a church-yard after dark if you can'.[85] He doubted they could without experiencing a sense of fear. They would be forced to recognise the spiritual thread that connected the living and the dead, and their professed materialism would be exposed as mere bravado.

While the usual seventeenth-century defences continued to be trotted out, there was a move towards recognising the problems of anecdotal evidence, which reflected the increasing judicial caution regarding spectral evidence that had helped put an end to the witch trials. Glanvill's hotchpotch of stories became something of an embarrassment to the ghost cause. A sceptic writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1732 observed that the association of such esteemed names as Boyle and the Earl of Clarendon with hauntings generated doubts that conflicted with his adherence to Reason. However, Reason was restored 'by a whole Conclave of Ghosts met in the works of Glanvil and Moreton'.[86] The Independent minister Isaac Watts accepted that many of the accounts of ghosts presented in Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* and Baxter's *Certainty of the World of Spirits* were 'insufficient proof'. Yet he maintained that evidence of just one real ghost was required to prove that 'there is a State of separate Spirits'. William Assheton similarly made clear that 'even amongst Protestants, abundance of these Apparitions have been mere banter and Collusion', but held to the position that 'Angels have appeared, Therefore Human Souls may likewise appear.'[87] As the century progressed the evidence brought forward

in defence of ghosts also became more selective, particularly with regard to the social status of informants. As the Rev. David Simpson remarked, 'the cry of superstition and credulity may be a sufficient answer to ninety nine in a hundred of the dreams and visions which are daily related'.[88] Still, despite such attempts at qualifying accounts of ghosts, the stark fact was that, with a couple of exceptions, those who continued to endorse ghost belief never saw a ghost themselves. One mid-century sceptic hammered the point home:

> the apparition is always seen, as it were at second hand. And if we are to select which we will choose to believe, and which discredit; what shall determine our faith and opinion; in stories equally attested, shall I say? Or rather equally not attested at all?[89]

By the late 1730s, attempts at maintaining a consensus between orthodox Anglican and evangelical tendencies had broken down, leading most significantly to the rise of Wesleyan Methodism. Ghosts ceased to act as ecumenical glue for factions within the Church of England, and consequently a further reposition regarding their reality took place. Just as ghost belief had been a signifier of Catholic 'superstition' during the Reformation, so now it marked out the evangelical tendency from sober, loyal Anglicans. Educated ghost belief became synonymous with pernicious religious enthusiasm, and to reject ghosts was a good way of allaying suspicions of having Methodist sympathies. As the influence of Methodism spread so did the propagandist Anglican accusations that the movement was responsible for fostering popular belief in witches, spirits and ghosts.

As is well known, John Wesley (1703–1791) and his followers were, indeed, devout believers in providence, diabolic possession, witchcraft and apparitions. In his *Journal*, which was published in instalments throughout his lifetime, he made several observations regarding ghosts. Considering his outspoken views on the spirit world, it is hardly surprising that he was repeatedly asked whether he had ever seen an apparition. His response to such enquiries was a weary

> No: nor did I ever see a murder. Yet I believe there is such a thing; yea, and that in one place or another, murder is committed every day. Therefore I cannot as a reasonable man deny the fact; although I never saw it, and perhaps never may. The testimony of unexceptionable witnesses fully convinces me both of one and the other.[90]

It was an argument expressed with the clarity and simplicity of a man skilled in popular communication. There was no need to resort to scriptural or

philosophical authorities: he spoke plain common sense. Although portrayed as absurdly credulous by his detractors, Wesley earnestly wrestled with the problems of the evidence for ghosts. In the early 1760s he read Baxter's *Certainty of the World of Spirits* during a journey to London and wrote in his journal, 'It contains several well-attested accounts. But there are some which I cannot subscribe to. How hard is it, to keep the middle way! Not to believe too little, or too much!'[91] Ultimately ghosts could not be sacrificed to the materialists, and, like Isaac Watts, he settled on the position that just one verifiable account of communication with a spirit would be sufficient to tumble the philosophical 'castles in the air' of the deists and atheists.[92]

Despite the strong Methodist association with supernaturalism, Keith Thomas quite rightly warned that 'it would be wrong to associate the belief in ghosts with any particular denomination'.[93] Some Anglican clergymen were willing to out themselves, though tellingly they were usually of a strong Calvinist persuasion, such as the Rev. Augustus Toplady (1740–1778), vicar of Broad Hembury, Devon. In 1775 he preached that there was 'nothing absurd in the metaphysical Theory of Apparitions'. He admitted that the vast majority of reported instances were either untrue or delusions, but declared it was his 'stedfast and mature Belief' that disembodied spirits had and could appear to the living.[94] The Macclesfield clergyman David Simpson, whose opinion we have already read, was forced out of a couple of curacies because of his evangelism and friendship with Methodists.

Neither was debate regarding ghosts confined to the opposing camps of the Calvinists and materialists. Public figures from diverse walks of life also committed to print the reasons for their belief in ghosts, often as a means of signifying their religious and political alignments. One of the most influential writers of the early part of the century, the politician Joseph Addison (1672–1719), a man who was generally dismissive of 'vulgar' beliefs, felt that the rejection of ghosts was a step too close to the blasphemous presumption of believing humans knew as much as God the creator. Besides, the weight of historical evidence was sufficient enough to take their existence seriously. He argued:

> I think a Person who is thus terrified with the imagination of ghosts and spectres much more reasonable than one who, contrary to the reports of all historians sacred and prophane, ancient and modern, and to the traditions of all nations, thinks the appearance of spirits fabulous and groundless.[95]

That other crucial prop of ghost belief, scriptural authority, was cited by the actress and author Eliza Fowler Haywood (1693–1756):

> For my Part, while I have the Authority of Holy Writ, the Judgment of the Fathers, and the Opinion of the best and wisest of all Nations and Religions on my Side, I shall not be asham'd to avow my Belief that Apparitions of departed Souls are not merely traditional, nor ashamed of any Imputation our modern Philosophers may throw upon me for it.

Haywood's friend, the fashionable London fortune-teller Duncan Campbell (d. 1730) launched a more detailed and staunch defence of ghosts in which he argued that there was nothing 'profane or irreligious' in believing in them.[96]

Someone who had ostensibly little vested interest in upholding ghost belief was the botanist and apothecary Samuel Frederick Gray (1766–1828). In the 1820s he published several respected works on pharmacy, but his first publishing venture, a couple of decades before, was a book on ghosts. It never appeared, and all that remains to tell us of this failed enterprise is a pamphlet trying to raise a public subscription to fund its publication. We know that Gray had planned to become a bookseller at one point, and so maybe the book was a pragmatic money-making exercise to capitalise on the pubic interest in ghosts. At any rate, Gray evidently planned to do more than just provide the usual cobbled together collection of old stories. He intended to rest his defence of the 'popular faith' in ghosts on social rather than religious foundations. 'We know, from facts,' he stated, 'that vicious persons have been frequently restrained from committing the most atrocious deeds, particularly from imbruing their hands in blood, by a dread of the nocturnal appearance of the injured person's Ghost.' Others 'of weak and vain minds' had likewise been snatched from wickedness 'by real or fancied supernatural warnings.' Gray argued, then, that ghost belief helped to uphold popular morality, and so 'let us not hastily erase from the mind an opinion which, at the worst, is perfectly harmless'.[97] Around the same time a similar defence of popular belief was used with regard to the magical activities of cunning-folk. A pamphlet biography of the Welsh cunning-man Mochyn Nant argued that if such people did not exist, common people 'would act in open defiance of all Laws, both human and divine'.[98] Such views, which went against the grain of 'civilised' thought at the time, should, perhaps, be considered in the context of the anti-authoritarianism engendered by the repressive political measures instituted during the Napoleonic Wars.

Of all the intellectual voices that refused to laugh at ghosts, the most influential was Dr Samuel Johnson. His most famous statement on the issue, uttered in 1778, was in response to a woman who expressed incredulity on the matter. With 'solemn vehemence' he replied, 'Yes, Madam: this is a question which, after five thousand years, is yet undecided; a question, whether in

theology or philosophy, one of the most important that can come before the human understanding.'[99] By this time Johnson's views on the matter were inextricably linked, in public perception, with his involvement in that *cause célèbre* of mid-eighteenth-century England, the Cock Lane Ghost. The case was used as a rod with which to whip the ghost defenders. For the next century any suspected noisy ghost was witheringly dismissed as another Cock Lane. Johnson's reputation as a beacon of the Enlightenment suffered badly both during and after his lifetime. The poet Charles Churchill was not only quick off the mark in publishing the first part of his poem *The Ghost* to capitalise on the Cock Lane sensation, but mercilessly caricatured Johnson in the guise of the character Pomposo – the 'vain idol of a scribbling crowd'. The Scottish minister Donald MacNicol (1735–1802), whose work on the spurious ancient Gaelic *Poems of Ossian* had been criticised by Johnson, got his own back by mocking the doctor's 'superstitious' gullibility. 'I am told', he remarked with relish, 'he was one of those *wise* men who sat up whole nights, some years ago, repeating *paternosters* and other *exorcisms*, amidst a group of old women, to conjure the Cock-lane ghost.' Political rather than personal differences lay behind the Whig politician Arthur Browne's derision of Johnson's character. This was a man, mocked Browne, 'who considered the extorted confessions of insane old women as evidence of witchcraft, and made a serious enquiry into the truth of the tale of the Cock-lane Ghost'.[100]

When Boswell came to write his *Life of Samuel Johnson* he was inclined 'to disdain and treat with silent contempt' the numerous accusations of credulity levelled at his friend. But so widespread was the mistaken belief that Johnson had been taken in by the Cock Lane fraud that Boswell felt it necessary to provide a public rebuttal, pointing out that Johnson was instrumental in revealing the imposture. Providing further proof, he also recorded a conversation with his friend regarding a ghost seen by a young woman of Newcastle. John Wesley, who had recounted the case to Johnson, believed it was true, though his brother Charles did not, and neither did Johnson. He said of Wesley, 'he believes it; but not on sufficient authority. He did not take time enough to examine the girl.' No doubt he considered his own investigations in Cock Lane as a yardstick.[101]

Despite its notoriety and public familiarity Cock Lane was not a turning point in the debate over ghosts, just as the Tedworth Drummer made little obvious dent in spirit beliefs a century earlier. The exposure of frauds was no proof that ghosts did not exist. Believers could even put a positive spin on the case. If as much time and effort was given to investigating every instance of apparent spirit activity then a genuine case would eventually be confirmed beyond doubt. Neither should Samuel Johnson's detractors be taken as representative of educated opinion on the subject. The vast majority of educated people

never produced books, poems and articles, or wrote letters to periodicals and newspapers. Maybe the historically silent majority were more inclined to side with Johnson's middle way than the evidence would suggest.

GHOSTS IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

In 1799 a tract on apparitions written by an anonymous divine included an address to the nation 'upon the pernicious and prevalent Doctrines of Atheism at this alarming Period'. It was a sign of the times that he managed to couple a defence of ghosts with a denunciation of Thomas Paine as a 'bane and pest of society'.[102] With the American and French Revolutions hovering like a spectre over England's ruling religious and secular elites, the last decades of the eighteenth century were a period of febrile political and religious activity. In such an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability many people sought comfort and guidance in the spiritual realm. It was a propitious time for mystical movements and prophets, such as Richard Brothers (1757–1824) and Joanna Southcott (1750–1814).[103] The renewed interest in all things spiritual and providential is also evident from the ubiquity of questions on the supernatural that were considered in that quintessential eighteenth-century forum of public discourse – the debating society.[104] Between 1789 and 1799 alone there were at least 33 debates in London regarding apparitions.[105] In October 1781, for example, the Coachmakers' Hall was the setting for a debate on the question, 'Is there any reality in the Doctrine of Apparitions?' Three years later, members of the Ciceronian Society considered 'Is the existence of Witches and Apparitions probable?' Debaters at the Christian Areopagus addressed the question, 'Does Reason or Revelation countenance a Belief in the Appearance of Ghosts and Apparitions?', while in November 1798, participants at the Westminster Forum deliberated, 'Is it true that any Ghosts or Departed spirits ever did appear to a Mortal in this World?' The substance of the debates is not easy to gauge from the sources. James Boswell, who recorded his attendance at a debate on the existence of apparitions at the Coachmakers' Hall in April 1781, provides a brief insight. He described the audience as numerous and containing some women. None of them were of the 'mere vulgar', he noted approvingly. As to the debate, 'they differed in opinion as to apparitions being seen in later ages. But I thought the opinion *for* was best supported, and Mr. Addison in the *Spectator* was brought as an authority.'[106]

While some debates centred on hoary precedents, others were sparked by recent occurrences, such as that at the Coachmakers' Hall in October 1789, which considered 'an Apparition lately appearing to a worthy Clergyman'.

The managers invited 'every person who can speak from Experience on this Occasion'. The apparition of a woman murdered in St Pancras sparked a series of debates on departed spirits in the spring of 1790. According to one advert, the ghost had 'not only frightened one Person to Death, but become the walking Terror of the whole neighbourhood'.[107] The majority of debates seem to have been refreshingly open-minded. An advertisement for a debate on ghosts at the Westminster Forum in January 1797 advised that

> it must receive the most ample investigation, from the number of Clerical and Literary Gentlemen by whom the institution is patronized. Many strange stories have been propagated concerning Apparitions, the Managers thus publicly declare, that they shall feel themselves gratified by the attendance of any person who can positively declare to the Audience, that they have either seen or conversed with a departed Spirit.[108]

At a debate at Capel-Court, in July 1790, regarding the reality of the apparitions of Julius Caesar and the prophet Samuel, a gentleman who had witnessed events at Cock Lane was present to 'communicate many valuable Particulars of that astonishing Transaction'.[109]

Some questions proposed for debate, however, were couched in typically sceptical fashion; the issue was not whether ghosts existed but the extent to which a belief in them was a mark of ignorance and credulity. Consider, for example, the following debate at the Westminster Forum in March 1790: 'Which is most absurd, a Belief in Apparitions, a Reliance on Dreams, or an implicit Faith in the Predictions of Judicial Astrology?' On such occasions those who believed in ghosts, astrology and the like were effectively appearing as defendants rather than engaging in an impartial debate. When the same question was considered for four weeks in a row at the City Debates, some of London's principal astrologers participated to defend their corner. The managers invited the occultist Ebenezer Sibly, author of the influential *A New and Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology*, and the 'celebrated' astrologer Mrs Williams.[110] At the third meeting held on 19 April 1790, over 300 men voted for an adjournment of the debate. The final session, held the following week, attracted 'one of the most numerous and brilliant audiences ever remembered', and was attended by nobility, gentry and 'numbers of the first literary characters in the nation'.[111]

It is a testament to the influence of Dr Samuel Johnson that several years after his death his opinions on ghosts were the basis for at least two debates. One wonders what Boswell would have thought of the outcome of the Westminster Forum debate, in January 1788, on the question 'Was the Belief

of the Existence of Apparitions by the late Doctor Johnson, an Impeachment of his Understanding?' By a small majority the audience decided that Johnson's 'belief in the existence of apparitions' was justified.[112] Although the recording of such outcomes is rare, it is significant that another sequence of similar debates, which focused on John Wesley's belief, ended in a similar resolution. The question, which was posed in response to recent press reports of the dispossession, in June 1788, of George Lukins by a group of Wesleyan ministers at Temple Church, Bristol,[113] and debated over at three evening meetings of the Capel Court Debating Society, was: 'Is the Rev. Mr. Wesley censurable for publicly maintaining the Existence of Witches, the Doctrine of Apparitions, and Demoniac Possessions?' At the first meeting 'an aged, venerable, and learned Methodist' gave accounts of several 'strange appearances', while a 'candid hearing' was also expected to be given to a female speaker who declared that she frequently conversed with an apparition. The debate 'terminated in Mr. Wesley's favour'.[114] The organisers of the memorable City Debate on apparitions and astrology of April 1790, pointed out in one of their adverts that, as several Dissenting ministers and those 'belonging to the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Communion, frequently attend these Debates, much important reasoning is expected on the Doctrine of Apparitions. The awful circumstance of an Apparition, related by the Rev. Mr. Wesley, shall be attended to.'[115]

PSYCHIC SCIENCE

Religion and philosophy had dominated the Enlightenment discourse over ghosts, but towards the end of the eighteenth century, science returned to the forefront of the debate. As we shall see in the next chapter, the pseudo-sciences that rose to prominence during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could be used to prove that ghosts were mere projections of the mind. Yet they were broad enough in their philosophical bases to allow for ghosts as external realities. The most influential of these pseudo-scientific developments was the concept of animal magnetism. Under certain conditions, adherents argued, mental and material impressions could be conducted through the medium of universal fluid. It was this conduction that explained magnetic attraction, the influence of the stars and electricity. However, the leading proponent of this theory, the Austrian Franz Mesmer (1734–1815), was primarily concerned with the medical implications of animal magnetism. If illnesses proceeded from the interruption or blockage of the universal fluid coursing through the human body, then it could also be cured by the application of magnets

or through the sympathetic channelling of the vital forces between human bodies. The mesmerist was born.[116]

Many of the adherents of animal magnetism considered themselves as cutting-edge scientists, pushing forward the boundaries of rational knowledge. Through the exploration of the occult properties of nature, the foundations of the supernatural could be exploded. It was a reformulation of the enthusiastic scientific claims of those inspired by the heady amalgam of natural and Neoplatonic philosophies during the mid seventeenth century. The investigations of the mid-nineteenth century German chemist Baron Karl Von Reichenbach, for example, are reminiscent of those of Kenelm Digby. Reichenbach's conception of odic or vital force, which he thought permeated and radiated from nearly all material substances, was an obvious adaptation of animal magnetism. The odic force was invisible to most people, though its effects could be witnessed in manifestations of magnetic attraction, electricity, heat and light. Certain people were more sensitive to these vital emissions than others and could see the odic force radiating from objects at night. Bearing in mind that ghosts were rarely seen by more than one person at the same time, Reichenbach pondered whether ghosts were merely the natural vital effluence seen by odic-sensitive people. Fired up by his desire as a scientist to 'inflict a mortal wound on the monster, superstition', he decided to take one of his sensitives, Mlle Reichel, a woman who, he said, 'had the courage, unusual in her sex' to agree to accompany him to a cemetery on two dark nights. 'The result justified my expectation', he reported. 'She saw very soon a light, and perceived on one of the grave mounds, along its whole extent, a delicate, fiery, as it were, a breathing flame. The same thing was seen on another grave in a less degree.' The flames were about four feet high, and only appeared over new graves. This was proof that it was the vital forces released by decaying bodies that lay behind the churchyard ghost. He concluded with evident relish that 'I have, I trust, succeeded in tearing down one of the densest veils of darkened ignorance and human error.'[117]

Reichenbach's confidence in his ghost-busting theory was ill-founded, for the theory of animal magnetism that had inspired him also provided a crucial source of 'scientific' support *for* spiritualism. As one adherent put it, 'Mesmerism has been – humanly speaking – the corner-stone upon which the Temple of Spiritualism was upreared.'[118] Considering that the idea of animal magnetism was fundamentally a materialist reworking of the Neoplatonic notion of a world permeated and governed by spirits, it is no wonder then that it was eagerly adopted by those who continued to seek proof for the existence of ghosts. If all matter was infused with Mesmer's fluidic force then surely it also linked soul and body in life, and therefore could also explain communications with

the afterlife. During the 1830s and 1840s, continental animal magnetists put the theory to the test and, sensationally, some claimed to have succeeded in contacting the spirits of the dead through trance or hypnotic states induced by magnetism.[119] In 1850, the same year that Reichenbach's magnum opus on odic force appeared in English, another translation, this time of the experiments of the Frenchman Louis Alphonse Cahagnet, was also published. Cahagnet claimed to have scientific proof of the existence of the afterlife. In his *Celestial Telegraph* he described how he had used eight somnambulists, that is people put into an ecstatic state by magnetism, as mediums. Through them contact was made with 36 souls. As Cahagnet explained, 'In the spiritual state the soul represents in man his whole form and each of his parts – his passions and pleasures, superiority, inferiority, and intelligence.' A spirit of the dead, 'individualized as on earth, has the recollection of its terrestrial existence, its family affections and friends, all which will be proved by psychological apparitions'.[120]

By 1850 the spiritualist movement had already caused a sensation across Europe and America. Initially communications were conducted via knocks, raps and the movement of tables, but as spiritualism developed so the supposed spirit manifestations became more elaborate and more physical. It is ironic that spiritualism soon came to rely on materialism for proof of its anti-materialist premise.[121] Spiritualists could explain the appearance of the spirits of the dead in seance rooms in terms of an ethereal materialisation of the primordial fluids attracted by the magnetic aura of the medium. If this was so, and such matter could be seen, touched and smelt, then logically it could also be scientifically analysed. The sceptics were constantly demanding proof, and with the first manifestations of ectoplasm it seemed that the very essence of ghosts was literally within grasp.[122] The term 'ectoplasm' was first used in cell biology in the 1880s to describe the viscid, white or translucent, semi-fluid substance that had been found to separate one cell from another. To Charles Richet, a French professor of physiology, the same substance seemed to constitute the streaming, fluid-like substance that emanated from the orifices and chests of mediums from the late nineteenth century onwards, particularly female ones, and sometimes apparently even formed into human faces and bodies. Ectoplasm was thought to be the solid essence of mesmeric fluidic forces, moulded by the sympathetic energy generated between the medium and the spirit world, allowing the dead to manifest themselves physically. Proof, at last, that ghosts had substance! This was something that had been argued back in the seventeenth century by the likes of Heydon, who saw ghosts as formulations of vaporous condensation and spiritual essences. But despite several decades of ectoplasmic emanations, close examination revealed them to be nothing

more than mundane household items such as muslin, cheesecloth, gelatine, and frothy egg whites.

The Society for Psychical Research was at the forefront of the investigation of such medium-inspired evidence. There soon developed a general consensus amongst the SPR most influential members, such as Frank Podmore and Edmund Gurney, that ghosts were not the sentient souls of the dead returning to earth. As this view became increasingly apparent in the Society's publications, its spiritualist members began to leave, particularly in 1886 when a popular medium was denounced as a fraud in the pages of its journal.[123] What Podmore and his fellow investigators felt they *had* found some evidence for was the reality of wraiths – or the appearance of apparitions at the *moment of death*. As Frederic Myers explained in the introduction to the huge survey of apparitions conducted by Gurney and Podmore, cases of these 'phantasms of the living' represented an 'objective fact'. Even apparitions appearing several hours after apparent death were not necessarily the ghosts of the deceased, for 'the moment of actual death is a very uncertain thing'.[124] The body went through a process of dissolution during which it retained some psychic energy. Although Myers later came to be convinced that telepathic communications were possible between spiritual and material worlds, he suggested that some purposeless apparitions were formed from the residues of peoples' energy lingering after death – a visual psychic memory. This theory, with its echoes of Paracelsus's aerial spirits, palingenesis and odic force, has proved to have lasting currency. Less accepted was his curious suggestion that apparitions were the projections generated by the incoherent dreams of the dead.[125]

It is significant that the early psychical researchers tended to avoid the term 'ghost' or placed it in inverted commas. They preferred to talk of 'phantasms of the dead' or 'apparitions occurring after death'. As the biographer of Harry Price noted, the ghost hunter also 'disliked the word intensely, though he could not object to it in the name of the Ghost Club'. Other than the necessity of using it for publicity purposes, he preferred to talk instead of 'entities' or 'paranormal appearances'.[126] 'Earthbound spirit' is also used now. More recently, the term 'apparition' has also largely fallen out of usage in the SPR's *Journal* and *Proceedings*. For the same reason 'haunting' too is now also frequently placed in inverted commas in relevant academic literature.

'Ghost' carried too much historical baggage for those who sought to maintain an impartial, scientific, empirical position free of religious inference. Spiritualists did not talk of ghosts and their seances took place in enclosed, largely controllable environments that encouraged detailed if often flawed investigation. Poltergeists, even if unwelcome, were likewise housebound and generally performed to order. Ghosts came to be defined as all the other

traditional apparitions that were not available for systematic observation. They appeared of their own volition and often outdoors. Their visits were infrequent or recorded only in legendary history.

Up until the advent of spiritualism and formal psychical investigation, the 'traditional' purposeful and memorial ghosts, with which this book is primarily concerned, had been integral to the debate about the spirit world. The modern spiritualist movement may have arisen from what was originally a typical case of noisy haunting, focused around adolescent girls (the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York State), but it quickly broke from tradition. The spirit of the dead became 'a mobile spirit, free of earthly bonds, including the tragedy of its own death', and in the process a new necromantic religion was born.[127] Spiritualism was about the human desire to make contact with the dead, while much of the prior history of ghosts was about spirits seeking out the living and attempts to prevent or limit their earthly appearance. With spiritualism the tables were turned in more senses than one.

Five

All in the Mind

The debates over the reality of ghosts demonstrate how supernaturalism was equal to the forces of rationalism. For as long as it was commonly accepted that people really did see apparitions of the dead, whether they were products of diabolic manipulation, palingenesis or odic forces, then there was sufficient diagnostic confusion and inconsistency for the reality of ghosts to remain intellectually relevant. Over the centuries, however, there were critics who rejected the external reality of apparitions altogether and who insisted that they were merely internal figments of the imagination. This chapter, therefore, is concerned with the various explanations put forward for what people *thought* they saw and heard.

THE PLAY OF LIGHT AND SOUND

As numerous authors pointed out over the centuries, many ghost sightings could be put down to simple tricks of the light playing on the fertile imaginations of those fearful of the night. A ghost was nothing but the play of shadows, imbuing everyday physical features with a sense of movement and uncanny luminescence. A moonlit night was the perfect setting for the imagination to work this magic or mischief. Some saw beauty in the transformation it wrought. One eighteenth-century essayist recalled gazing at a pastoral mountain landscape as darkness descended and cogitating on how it was 'the time when the ghosts are supposed to make their appearance, and spirits visit the solitary dwellings of the dead'. But as the moon began to spread its silver rays over the scene he was possessed not with fear but awe at the beauty it cast, 'every object appeared more delicately shaded, and arrayed in softer charms'. It took a poetic soul and a rational mind to see the moonlit night in this way, he implied, and the essayist reflected 'on the excessive timidity that possesses many people's mind' to feel apprehension and terror at such a moment.[1] The eighteenth-century actress Eliza Haywood knew several such

people who were of 'so timid a Nature, that they take every Shadow, which the Moon makes by her Shine on distant Objects, for a Ghost'. She recounted how a male friend took the churchyard test one moonlit night and fell into a fit after mistaking an old yew tree for the ghost of his brother who had died a year before.[2] The writer and actor Arthur Murphy (1727–1805) had similar churchyard experiences with some of his acquaintances. When 'the glimpses of the moon formed their own shadow upon the ground I could behold them suddenly stop and gaze at it with looks full of wildness and amazement'.[3] The moralising novelist Elizabeth Bonhôte (1744–1818) patronisingly portrayed the lower classes as being so cowed by superstition that they could barely step outdoors at night without being frightened near to death:

> After the sun has withdrawn his rays, though the bright beams of the moon illumine their paths, they see an imaginary ghost in every tree, gate, or stile; and when they retire to their apartments by themselves, are in a continual dread, lest their curtains should be undrawn by the hand of some visible or invisible spectre.[4]

Ghosts born of moonlit apprehension were created by the shedding of new light on familiar objects. Another origin of luminous deception imbued a light source with the semblance of sentient movement. A candle or lantern moving to and fro before the windows of a house or flitting along an alleyway at night, the dark rendering the candle's owner a strange, shadowy figure, could easily be mistaken for a spirit by timid individuals. One folklorist recorded that shepherds moving about the hills with a lantern at night during lambing time were sometimes mistaken for spirit lights.[5] Of a less innocent nature, Defoe recalled a hoax perpetrated by some Dorking schoolboys on the neighbours of an elderly lady who had recently died. One of the boys perambulated around her house and neighbouring fields at night with a lantern, leading locals to believe it was the spirit of the woman. 'It must be confess'd', said Defoe, 'that a dark Lanthorn, join'd with an Enthusastick head, might prevail to make such a Sham take, with weak and bigoted People.'[6] The Yorkshire manufacturer and merchant Joseph Lawson (1821–1890) thought many ghost sightings derived either from such deception or from people wandering innocently at night with candles. He suggested, quite reasonably, that one of the consequences of the spread of gas was that the scope for such luminous deception was vanquished, as gas was a stationary source of domestic lighting.[7] Yet, under certain conditions, even gas lighting, the supposed destroyer of ghosts, could create its own apparitions. One night in October 1851 a couple of hundred people gathered outside an empty house in Northgate Street, Gloucester, after

word got around that the pale ghost of a young girl had been seen at an open window at the top of the building. Two intrepid men entered the house to find the ghost but saw nothing. It eventually became apparent that the vision was nothing more than the light of a street lamp reflected by the window onto a whitewashed wall of the room. In 1872 a supposedly haunted house in Brixton Road, London, caused a great disturbance. There was a defective gas light in the house and every time it flickered a crowd of local boys raised the cry of 'Ghost!'[8]

Another moving light that caused much mystery, the *ignis fatuus*, described by one seventeenth-century dictionary as a 'flighty exhalation set on fire', was long cited as an explanation for some ghost sightings.[9] The Calvinist theologian William Fulke (1536/37–1589), the first English writer to discuss the supernatural interpretation and natural cause of the will-o'-the-wisp, stated that 'ignorant and superstitious fooles have thought [them] to be soules tormented in the fire of Purgatory'. He went on to suggest that 'the Devill hath used these lights (although they be naturally caused) as strong delusions to captive the minds of men with feare of the Popes Purgatory'.[10] It was not just the appearance of mysterious lights in the darkened countryside that generated the wealth of folklore surrounding the phenomenon; it was also because the light seemed to be sentient. As one seventeenth-century writer explained, it 'appears like unto a Candle, playing and moving to and fro the air'.[11] Numerous historical accounts record how the light followed or seemed deliberately to lead people into bogs, rivers and pits. Fulke observed how those so bothered 'will tell a great tale, how they have beene led about by a spirit in the likeness of Fire'.[12] Today the rational explanation for these lights is that they are caused by the combustion of natural gas produced by rotting organic material, usually in boggy or marshy places, though little research seems to have been done to confirm this. Some early modern naturalists suggested that the congregation of large numbers of glow-worms created the *ignes fatui*.[13] More orthodox interpretations, which were not so far from the modern explanation, concerned gaseous expulsions, such as the suggestion that they were caused by sulphurous exhalations from 'muddy Pools, Church-yards, and other putrid places'.[14] Fulke thought the flames might sometimes be caused by the ignition of 'glewish or oyly matter' in places such as churchyards where there was an 'abundance of such unctuous and fat matter'. The most accepted explanation, also suggested by Fulke, was that the violent movement of cold air created the flames. During the early eighteenth century this explanation was disseminated widely for the purpose of popular enlightenment in numerous editions of *The Shepherd's Kalender*.[15]

The folklore record shows that supernatural beliefs regarding the will-o'-the-wisp continued to be held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with numerous informants recounting how they had been led astray at night by the lights. But widespread drainage of wetlands and bogs meant that by the twentieth century the *ignis fatuus* was a rare phenomenon in many areas of the country, yet industrialisation over the same period generated new gaseous ghosts. Strange lights were generated in mines by the leakage of natural gas. In Devon the Jack o' Lantern was thought to play over spots were veins of metal lay buried.[16] In 1804 *The Times* reported that a fiery spirit had reputedly plagued a farmhouse in the coalfields around Bilston, Staffordshire. The farmhouse had been built over an old coal-pit and an aperture in the cellar had long been used to dispose of household waste. One night the servant woman went down to the cellar and was frightened out of her wits by a blue flame bellowing forth from the hole. The mystery was solved when further investigation confirmed it was an ignition of mine gas, and as a consequence the farmer abandoned the property.[17]

As well as uncanny lights and reflections, the imaginations of the timid, childish or superstitious (in the words of the debunkers) were also provoked to feverish depths by strange noises in the night. These were often put down to nothing more than timbers and old furniture creaking and cracking as they expanded and contracted due to damp and dryness. Maybe they were the result of doors and windows rattling in the wind, or, in the last couple of centuries, water pipes and boilers gurgling, clanking and hissing. The spookiest nocturnal noises were those that suggested to fertile minds the deliberate movement of some unseen entity. Footsteps in the night or the sudden clatter of pots and pans, which no draught could have possibly disturbed, sent households into a panic. The rationalists' answer to such mysteries was simple – animals. Calmet commented on 'cats or owls, or even rats, which by making a noise frighten the master and domestics'.[18] A century later, Charles Ollier in his *Fallacy of Ghosts* singled out cats. They were, he suggested, 'prodigal agents in such matters, and there can be little doubt that the greater number of ominous noises which frighten sober people out of their senses are attributable to them'.[19] This was certainly true in the experience of Andrew Campbell, an actor at the Royal Dramatic College, Woking. In 1863 he described his experience of a haunting many years before, observing that 'anything which tends to allay the fears of superstition, particularly in the young, cannot but be approved'.[20]

Campbell's ghostly encounter occurred while staying at the Elizabethan manor house of a wealthy Hertfordshire farmer. One night, around midnight, the household was awoken by banging and crashing noises emanating from the kitchen and a sound of a heavy object being dragged across the floor. Armed

with his blunderbuss, the farmer, along with his servants wielding pokers, went down and threw open the kitchen door. They were greeted with the sound of smashing glass and then silence. They found the floor littered with broken china and several panes of glass were broken. The house must be haunted, they thought. Several servants gave their notice to quit and the farmer's wife desired to leave. The rumpus was calmed when, several weeks later, Campbell discovered the real cause of the haunting. While walking along a path near the farm he came across the corpse of a cat with its head stuck in a saucepan. 'Had I not thus discovered the cause of all the alarm the house would have remained with the reputation of being haunted, and the children's children of the terrified farmer would have convinced other children that their grandfather's home was really a haunted one.'

CHILDHOOD STORIES

It was all very well detailing all the obvious natural causes for hauntings, but what made some people so timid in the first place? It was not only the uneducated and ignorant that started at shadows or refused to pass through churchyards at night. The answer seemed to stem from childhood influence. Some argued that moral, purposeful ghost stories could 'produce in youth, sentiments that will stimulate them to good and virtuous actions'. Andrew Baxter, writing in 1733, cautioned against telling children 'silly, idle relations' of ghosts, but warned, 'We ought not to tell them that all these things are groundless and absurd.'[21] Most eighteenth-century medical writers and educationalists, however, saw exposure to them as mentally and socially damaging. Beliefs and impressions instilled in childhood were sometimes impossible to erase in adulthood. As Erasmus Darwin, a physician, natural philosopher and founder member of the Lunar Society explained, the 'false notions, which we receive in our early years … affect all our future reasoning by their perpetual intrusions'.[22] Another physician warned that he could relate many instances where children who imbibed 'idle stories' of apparitions and haunted houses suffered a tragic fate in adult life, due to the timid nature it had instilled in them.[23] Such views harked back to the philosopher John Locke's warning, in his *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), that young, tender minds should be protected from 'Notions of Sprites and Goblins, or any fearful Apprehensions in the dark.' A couple of decades later Joseph Addison made a similar observation.[24] In Darwin's view, the only cure for childhood exposure to ghost stories was to increase the general knowledge of the laws of nature to 'counteract the fallacies of our senses'.[25] The more practical solution, of course, was not filling

children's heads with fanciful stories in the first place. This was not as easy as it sounded, since servants rather than parents usually tended the infants of the educated and wealthy and were employed to keep them occupied. So the servants also had to be instructed. To this end *The Compleat Servant-Maid*, which was reprinted many times during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, advised regarding the instruction of children:

> Neither terrify them into a Complyance to do any thing, by talking of Ghosts, Spirits, Hobgoblins, and such like ridiculous things, (which is a wicked Method too often put in Practice to the great Detriment of Children) for, comparatively speaking, as they are soft as Wax, the first Impression will be deep, and as they encrease in Years, they will retain it the stronger, and it will be almost impossible ever to root it out of their Minds.[26]

If blame was to be apportioned for the perpetuation of such pernicious fears, then it lay firmly with womankind. The *London Journal* stated in a note on ghosts in 1732, 'Mothers and grandmothers, aunts and nurses, begin the cheat.' In the same year the *Gentleman's Magazine* agreed: 'The Cheat is begun by Nurses with Stories of Bugbears, & c. from when we are gradually led to listen to the traditionary Accounts of local Ghosts.'[27] Elizabeth Bonhôte joined in the patriarchal attack, denouncing the 'ignorant nurse' and her foolish ghost stories, which 'neither time, good sense, or the united exertions of parental tenderness, or authority' could eradicate from children so damaged.[28] While female servants, usually uneducated and from the countryside, were singled out as the prime culprits in perpetuating irrational fears in the children of the expanding middling-sort in society, ultimately it was surely the responsibility of mothers to ensure their offspring were being properly tutored. The bookseller, translator and devoted family man Joseph Collyer asserted in his parenting guide that 'Mothers are the natural nurses of their children; and it is their business to tutor and mould minds as well as their bodies.' Consequently, they 'should be careful not to create groundless fears, by making the child afraid of being in the dark, and by telling him idle tales of ghosts'.[29] Such guides as *The Compleat Servant-Maid* were not meant to be read by their subject, then, but served as instructive reading for mistresses on how to ensure that their female servants behaved appropriately. A subtext to these concerns over the influence of female servants was that women could transmit their foibles and weaknesses to boys, potentially crippling their virility in later life. Reginald Scot thought that some men were prone to seeing ghosts due to a 'cowardlie nature and complexion, or from an effeminate and fond bringing up'.[30] One mid-eighteenth-century writer even personified 'foolish' ghost-beliefs as female, and beseeched 'pull

the old Woman out of our Hearts', and thereby extinguish the absurd beliefs imbibed in childhood.[31]

The cause of adult timidity syndrome, as we might call it today, lay not only in childhood exposure to the scary tales of illiterate nurse maids. While books, periodicals and newspapers were seen as valuable conduits for providing the rational knowledge and spiritual strength to vanquish ghost belief, some types of literature were accused of perpetuating 'superstitious' fears. Thus the *Gentleman's Magazine*, in its 1732 discourse on ghosts, complained of the 'Suburbian Ghosts, rais'd by petty Printers, and Pamphleteers, and the Apparitions consequent to their Half-penny bloody Murders.'[32] During the early nineteenth century several educated men indulged in a bit of self-psychoanalysis to try and understand why they thought they had seen ghosts or had believed in them for so long, when they evidently did not exist. They found a resolution in their childhood reading material. Joseph Taylor, in his pamphlet on apparitions, confessed: 'in the early part of my life, having read many books in favour of Ghosts and Spectral Appearances, the recollection remained so strong in my mind, that, for years after, the dread of phantoms bore irresistible sway'.[33] But the formative effect of childhood reading was so powerful that its engrained influence could operate beyond the conscious rejection of ghosts. In the early 1820s, one man, who did not believe in ghosts and yet saw visions of a young woman he knew was dead, ascribed them to his overactive imagination. He had always been interested in the supernatural, he said, and thought his perusal of the *Tales of Wonder* and other ghost stories when a child shaped the hallucinations produced by his mind as an adult.[34]

The obvious strategy to undermine this second pernicious prop of infant timidity was to ensure that no such literature found its way into children's hands. The second approach, fully evident by the end of the eighteenth century, was to bypass the nurse completely and provide anti-ghost literature to be read *by* children. Women were at the forefront of this literary enterprise. The most famous works of the genre were the Cheap Repository Tracts produced for poor, rudimentary readers by the evangelical Hannah More, who was much concerned about the moral effect of ungodly, 'superstitious' popular literature.[35] Likewise, the educationalist Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810) provided a moral ghost story in her periodical *The Family Magazine*, which was produced 'To counteract the pernicious Tendency of immoral Books, &c. which have circulated of late Years among the inferior classes of People.' It consisted of a dialogue between Robert the ploughman and his sweetheart Betty. Betty loves reading about spirits and witches late at night and tells Robert about how she had been much frightened one night the previous week. As an owl screeched, the door creaked and the wind whistled down the chimney she

thought she heard ghostly footsteps; all was explained by a dog scratching a piece of furniture. The dame who looks after her requests the parson to come and give her an instructive talk. He tells her that it was 'very wicked, as well as very foolish, to be afraid of ghosts' and orders her to burn all her story books, dream books and fortune-telling books. Robert agrees that the parson had, indeed, provided very good advice.[36]

Similar in vein, though much longer and clearly aimed at middle- rather than working-class readers, were the series of dialogues between several young ladies and a token young gentleman that formed Mary Weightman's *The Friendly Monitor; Or, Dialogues for Youth against the Fear of Ghosts* (1791). In their correspondence the reality of ghosts is debated with reference to excerpts from *The Spectator* and Bonhôte's *The Parental Monitor*. As Weightman stressed in her introduction, the book was 'professedly designed for the use and benefit of children, in assisting them to banish the tales of the nursery'. So too was a threepenny-bit pamphlet on the 'mischievous doctrine of ghosts', published several times at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This told the story of a Mr Howard and his four pretty offspring who are frightened by strange noises in their house. Careful investigation reveals a rational explanation, leading to the instructional observation: 'many things appear to us supernatural, merely from our want of properly inquiring into them; and the fears which generally seize us on these occasions, prevent our making a proper use of our senses'.[37]

MELANCHOLY

Those who started at shadows, saw ghosts in moonlit trees and jumped at the sound of nocturnal creaks were often diagnosed as suffering from melancholy, a mental affliction that may have had its origins in nursery fears and frights but afflicted people in adulthood. The symptoms – dejection, sadness, gloominess, introspection and haunting dreams – equate to a certain extent with what we now call depression, though the condition has to be understood in the context of the time rather than by modern comparisons. Although for much of the early modern period it was thought to arise from the fumes given off by corrupt, black blood rising to the brain, it was also understood and treated as a psychological condition.[38] Key symptoms of melancholia, which are not essential to the modern concept of depression, were hallucinations and visions. In a world in which spirits were thought to be pervasive it is no wonder that suffers complained of being plagued with devils, witches and ghosts. It was a standard argument proposed by early modern witchcraft sceptics like Reginald Scot and John Webster, that melancholy explained why

some accused witches confessed to fantastic deeds and why some victims of witchcraft told extraordinary tales of spiritual malevolence.[39] Melancholiacs were not necessarily considered mad, however, though the condition could eventually lead to madness.

Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) was hugely influential in defining, explaining and treating melancholia through the extensive compilation of thoughts on the matter from the ancient Greeks onwards. As a sufferer he was understanding and compassionate, advising from personal experience, 'Be not solitary, be not idle.' He described the development of melancholy in the sufferer as follows:

> At first his mind is troubled, he doth not attend what is said, if you tell him a tale, he cries at last, what said you? but in the end he mutters to himselfe, as old women doe many times, or old men when they sit alone, upon a sudden they whoop and hollow, or run away, and sweare they see or heare players, divels, hobgoblins, ghosts.

Ghosts, he further observed were 'ever in the minds' of the melancholic, and they met them at 'every turne'. Consequently he advised the friends and family of melancholics to avoid all tales of devils, spirits and ghosts when in their company.[40] Burton's citation of ghosts and spirits as symptomatic of the advanced stages of melancholy is attested to by the medical casebooks of a couple of his contemporaries who practised as astrologer-physicians. The London practitioner Simon Forman, whom Burton apparently consulted as a young man, dealt with numerous melancholiacs who complained of being troubled by spirits.[41] There was Susan Cuckston, for example, who 'in the 40th year of her age fell into a melancholy despair and was moch vexed & trobled in mind and possessed with a sprite for oftentimes the sprite wold speake & talke to her'. Another woman was 'haunted at night with a goste, or sprite contynually'.[42] The Buckinghamshire clergyman and physician Richard Napier was evidently considered a specialist in curing such mental disturbances. Many of his melancholic clients suffered from what he called 'strange fancies'. There was one who 'seeth many things which he seeth not', and the woman who was 'haunted, as she thinketh, with an ill spirit'.[43]

While a childhood disturbed by ghost stories was certainly thought to predispose one to suffering melancholy in adulthood, other factors were often thought to trigger the condition, such as anxiety brought on by religious enthusiasm, the fear of bewitchment, and grieving. Guilt was another cause that had strong associations with haunting. Thomas Hobbes, writing in 1656, explained how

> For to some men, as well sleeping as waking, but especially to guilty men, and in the night, and in hallowed places, Fear alone, helped a little with the stories of such Apparitions, hath raised in their minds terrible Phantasmes, which have been, and are still deceiptfully received for things really true.[44]

This guilt-inspired melancholia helped explain why murderers sincerely thought the ghosts of their victims persecuted them. In a discussion on the issue Daniel Defoe observed that 'Conscience, indeed, is a frightful Apparition itself, and I make no Question but it oftentimes haunts an oppressing Criminal into Restitution.' In this sense, conscience made 'Ghosts walk, and departed Souls appear, when the Souls themselves know nothing of it.'[45]

The appearance of ghostly visions continued to torment the conscience of murderers during the nineteenth century. The potency of the tradition in affecting patterns of behaviour is well illustrated by the case of Thomas Bedworth, who, in 1815, was executed for the murder of Elizabeth Beesmore. Between the years 1804 and 1813 Bedworth had served in the navy and on his release from service found that his wife had been in a bigamous relationship and had three children during his long absence. In response, Bedworth bigamously married his wife's sister Elizabeth Beesmore and removed to London. The relationship soon turned sour and Bedworth slit her throat in a fit of jealousy. He fled northwards, passing through Hampstead, and slept in a hayfield in southern Hertfordshire. It was here that, according to his own confession, he was first tormented by 'the deep groaning of one, as in great agony, whose voice was exceedingly like that of the deceased, and he passed the remainder of the night in much disquietude and alarm'.[46] The next night he slept in a field near St Albans, where he heard the voice of Beesmore exclaim, 'Oh Bedworth! Bedworth! What have you done?' The next day, frightened and disorientated, he returned to London and spent the night in a sheep-pen at Smithfield Market. It was here that 'the murdered woman appeared to him with a dreadful noise, and bitter exclamations'. The next day, as he was walking up Highgate Hill, Beesmore's ghost appeared to him once more: 'she walked with him, side by side, until they reached the other side of the hill, and then taking the hand of the miserable man, place it upon her severed throat, groaned and mourned deeply!'[47] Bedworth fled northwards for several days, but haunted to distraction he eventually gave himself up in Coventry.[48] At the other end of the century, in 1887, a poacher named David Pilmore also gave himself up to police after seeing the ghost of a gamekeeper named Edward Copley he had shot dead during an affray at Badsworth, near Pontefract. Pilmore escaped, though a fellow poacher died while they were on the run and Pilmore buried his body in a wood. Pilmore hid himself in the wood for some time and then

enlisted with the Royal Berkshire Regiment under an assumed name. It was while he was on sentry duty at Reading Barracks one night that he thought he saw Copley's ghost walk and in a state of shock immediately confessed his crime to another sentry. He was later sentenced to death at Leeds Assizes, but was subsequently reprieved.[49] As the literary historian Terry Castle perceptively commented, in such cases 'Providence now works at one remove, through the medium of individually psychology, but the end result is the same.'[50]

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Terrible dreams may have been one of the symptoms of melancholy, but everyone, melancholic, mad or otherwise, were and are subjected to nocturnal visions. Dreams continue to perplex and fascinate us today, but in previous centuries their interpretation and significance was integral to fundamental issues of religion and philosophy.[51] Sleep was seen as an altered state of being on the boundary between life and death, and as such, an appropriate time for God, angels and the spirits of the dead to communicate. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, supported the notion that dreams could be portentous. The biographies of medieval and post-Reformation Catholic saints are full of dream encounters with God and the angels. Even though many Reformation clergymen argued that the age of miracles was over and men should not expect to receive divine communications, dream visions lay at the heart of early modern radical Protestant movements. Through lay prophets, while asleep or in trance states, God rained down messages warning of divine sanction, personal and collective punishment, and ultimately the advent of the Apocalypse. English Puritan writings are littered with divine and demonic dream encounters. Dream books, popular across Europe, further reinforced the notion that dreams could be interpreted as omens within a secular as well as a religious framework of belief. Dream visions were, then, woven into the mental fabric of faith and the conception of life and afterlife. Even Descartes drew prophetic significance from several disturbing dreams he had as a young man. In one he was terrified by the appearance of several phantoms. He took them to be a warning from God regarding his sinful life, and he resolved to reform his behaviour subsequently.[52]

Ghosts were not usually seen as divine messengers – that role was usually reserved for angels, though it could be said that the interventionist saints in Catholic faith were technically the spirits of the dead. Yet there was no explicit biblical reason why, with God's permission, ghosts could not invite themselves into one's metaphysical world. But considering they usually appeared while

people were conscious, there seemed little obvious reason why they should want to do so. Thomas Tryon believed he had an answer to this conundrum. 'Men in Dreams are nearer unto the condition of departed Souls than when awake;' he observed, 'and therefore they can with ease, and great familiarity discourse and reveal their minds unto them.' The reason why they could do so with greater ease was because it was very difficult for souls to garb themselves in aerial bodies, and the forces required to do so could only be generated when affection for the living and the urgency to communicate were 'wonderful strong and powerful'. For those spirits of the dead who had no murder to reveal or urgent information to impart, but merely wanted to maintain some affectionate relationship with their mortal loved ones, dreams provided a less arduous and gentler vehicle in which to manifest themselves in visible form.[53] The danger with such an interpretation of dream spirit communication was in assuming that what one saw or heard was a benign angel or the spirit of the dead when in fact it was the Devil himself. Sleep was also a state in which people's moral defences were at their weakest and the mind most vulnerable to nocturnal diabolic interference and deception. But for what purpose would the Devil want to mimic sympathetic ghostly visitations? This was certainly on Thomas Nashe's mind when he pondered, 'why in the likeness of one's father or mother, or kinsfolks, he oftentimes presents himself unto us'. He surmised that the only reason was that 'in those shapes which he supposeth most familiar unto us, and that we are inclined to with a natural kind of love, we will sooner harken to him than otherwise'.[54]

Tryon was writing at a time when, as we have seen, expressing ghost belief in some intellectual circles was akin to carrying a sign stating 'Down with Atheists and Deists'. Yet there was also increasing concern about the growth and influence of Enthusiastic, Nonconformist sects. They were accused of drawing upon and promoting dubious supernatural inspiration at a time when Anglican theology was slowly, painfully assuming a rationalist position. Tryon, for instance, was a former Baptist, who broke from the denomination after being enthused by the spiritualist, revelatory writings of the mystic Jakob Boehme. Partly because of the strong association of dream visions with the providential preaching of the likes of the Methodists and Moravians, during the early eighteenth century dream encounters with spiritual beings came to be pathologised by the medical fraternity.[55] Dreams were abnormal – even dangerous; a sign of mental disorder rather than divine inspiration.

The rationalisation of the dream experience was, in fact, as old as history. The early church fathers, such as Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), cautioned against mistaking dreams brought about by bodily imbalance or an empty stomach for divine revelation.[56] So Thomas Nashe (1567–1601) was saying

nothing controversial when he dismissed dreams as the 'bubbling scum or froth of the fancy', nothing more than 'the echo of our conceits in the day'.[57] Neither was Hobbes expressing anything particularly radical when he stated that the 'opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts and goblins' was born of their ignorant inability 'to distinguish dreams, and other strong fancies, from vision and sense'.[58] Natural disturbances of the stomach, mind and blood were also used to explain *what* people dreamed as well as *why* they dreamed. Hobbes suggested, for instance, that 'Cold doth in the same manner generate Feare in those that sleep, and causeth them to dream of Ghosts, and to have Phantasmes of horrour and danger.'[59] But to undermine completely the religious foundation of dream spirit communication required a fundamental rethink of the relationship between soul and body. To this end John Locke used dreams as part of his logical deconstruction of the principle that the soul was a sentient entity independent from the body. If that was the case, he enquired, why were dreams, 'for the most part, so frivolous and irrational'? Dreams, he suggested, were 'all made up of the waking Man's Ideas, though, for the most part, oddly put together'. If the soul was capable of acting independently while the body was at rest, why did it generate such nonsensical and incoherent thoughts?[60] To dream *of* ghosts was natural but to think one was in the presence of ghosts during sleep could only be rationalised in terms of mental disorder. This could be just a temporary condition engendered by sleep or it could be symptomatic of insanity.

A nightmare is now a synonym for a 'bad dream', but up until the last century it was used to describe a specific type of sleep disturbance involving paralysis, the sensation of a heavy weight on the chest, and vivid aural and visual hallucinations of a humanoid or animal presence. In his successful book on the *Philosophy of Sleep*, first published in 1830, the physician Robert Macnish described how he suffered from the condition: 'I have experienced the affection stealing upon me while in perfect possession of my faculties, and have undergone the greatest tortures, being haunted by spectres, hags, and every sort of phantom.'[61] The experience is known as sleep paralysis in modern medical terminology, and has been the subject of considerable international research in recent years.[62] This has shown that the phenomenon is triggered by the disturbance of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep episodes, and various estimates suggest that up to 20 per cent of the population may experience it at least once in their lives. Medical interest in the nightmare actually dates back to the ancient Greeks. The physician Galen (c. 129–216 AD), whose work dominated medical thought and understanding until the seventeenth century, provided a natural cause for this frightening experience, which in Greek was known as the *ephialtes*. But until the early twentieth century in popular culture

the nightmare experience was also attributed to supernatural forces. Indeed, the term 'nightmare' derives from the ancient belief in the *mara*, a supernatural being that lay on people and suffocated them at night, just like the *incubus* of Roman mythology. People across Europe, while commonly aware of its natural causation, continued to explain it in terms of assaults by the Devil, witches, fairy-beings, vampires and ghosts. Today some reports of nocturnal alien visitations can be put down to the same experience.

In England, up until the twentieth century, witchcraft was the most common supernatural explanation for the experience. Witches were thought either to pay nocturnal visits themselves or to send evil spirits to oppress people in their sleep. Edmund Gardiner, in his *Phisicall and Approved Medicines* (1611) talked of 'this dreadfull griefe (which some being much deceived, thinking that it must onely proceede of witchcraft)'.[63] Because of the stereotypical image of the ugly old witch, the nightmare was described as 'hag-riding' in some parts of the country. In the area of Pudsey, Yorkshire, the experience was also called the 'bitch dowter'. As Joseph Lawson explained, sufferers 'saw a woman they knew well, as fair as every they saw anyone in their life, standing over them with a dagger or "whittle" (carving knife), threatening to murder them, whilst they could not stir hand or foot'.[64] As we have seen, molesting ghosts were uncommon, with violent behaviour usually being expressed through the throwing of objects and knockings. But as a modern comprehensive study of such supernatural assault traditions noted, the features of the nightmare were and are 'easily assimilated to accounts of haunting'.[65] Thomas Tryon observed regarding the nightmare that 'the Vulgar, when they are thus affected, conceit it some external thing comes and lies upon them, which they fancy to be some Ghost, or Hob-Goblin'.[66] This would seem to have been partly the case with Sara Rodes of Bolling, Yorkshire. In March 1649/50 she was plagued with the apparitions of local women both living and dead. Her mother deposed that one night she, Sara and her child lay in bed together, and 'after theire first sleepe' she awoke to find Sara quaking with fear. 'Mother,' she explained, 'Sikes wife [a suspected witch] came in att a hole att the bedd feete, and upon the bedd, and tooke me by the throate, and wold have put her fingers in my mowth, and wold needes choake me.' She said she was unable to speak because Sikes held her throat and pinned her down.[67]

It is possible that as popular fear of witches began to recede during the nineteenth century, ghosts may have become a more frequent explanation for sleep paralysis.[68] It would seem to have been an aspect of the experiential phenomena in the Sampford Ghost case, even if the haunting was undoubtedly a fraud. In the Rev. Colton's affidavit he mentioned that the occupants' sleep was disturbed by violent blows on their bodies from an invisible hand, and

'by a suffocating and almost inexpressible weight'.[69] It was certainly central to the haunting, in 1851, of the house of a gardener named John Clark and his family, of Weston-super-Mare, Somerset. One Sunday night in early June they and two lodgers heard strange noises like the rattling of chairs and tables. After this disturbing event all except Clark went back to sleep. As Clark recalled:

> he was wide awake, and heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and presently a man entered the room, and coming up to the bedside, placed his hands on Clark's face, drew down his arms, and grasped him very tight by his two hands; he held him in this situation for a short period, when the hands of the nocturnal visitor appeared to get gradually smaller, till they became as small as a young child's, when his hold relaxed, and the apparition disappeared … it appeared to be a man about five feet six inches in height, with very black curly hair, and rather stout; that when he was holding him he placed his face very near his, and that he felt his breath very hot, as were also his hands. Clark says he tried to speak and move, but had no power to do either, but immediately his visitor left he jumped up in bed and gave an alarm.

Clark went to work the next morning, but found it difficult to get over the terror of his ghostly assault and fell seriously ill. A man named Tripp, who said he had lived in the house three years before, told Clark he too had seen the apparition nearly a dozen times, which was always heralded by the rattling of chairs and tables.[70]

Sleep paralysis could also explain the nocturnal torment of a man named Ingerson of Ramsey, Cambridgeshire, as reported in the *Cambridge Chronicle* in March 1844. This was almost certainly the tailor Jonathan Ingerson recorded in the 1851 census, and he would have been aged 36 at the time. Ingerson and his wife went to bed early one night and he woke up around twelve o'clock and heard the bedroom door open and shut and saw a women dressed in white enter. He was seized by the ghost, and, as he said, was 'nearly dragged out of bed'. Unable to budge the 'inanimate Ingerson', the ghostly woman then left angrily slamming the door shut on its way out. Nevertheless it returned again around four o'clock and attempted the same manoeuvre. The following night Ingerson asked a local Primitive Methodist preacher named Poole to sleep in their bedroom to ward of the tormenting ghost, which proved effective. The *Cambridge Chronicle* concluded, 'Such is the true version of this marvellous tale, a great portion of the inhabitants entirely believing it, shuddering with dread at the awful visitations experienced by Ingerson.'[71]

Following Galen's opinions on the subject, the early modern educated consensus was that the nightmare was merely the result of, variously, poor

blood circulation, undigested vapours from the stomach oppressing the brain, or thick phlegm settling around the heart. Even James I dismissed supernatural causation. Still, the defence of the spirit world put up by the likes of Glanvill during the second half of the seventeenth century, and the related sensitivities regarding accusations of atheism meant that there remained some reluctance to completely dismiss the supernatural. One of the writers for the coffeehouse journal the *Athenean Mercury*, probably the Rev. Samuel Wesley, asserted that witches sometimes caused the nightmare. Even the highly respected physician Thomas Willis (1621–1675), a pioneering author on the brain and nervous system, and critic of the concept of possession, did not absolutely discount spirit involvement. 'The common people superstitiously believe, that this passion is indeed caused by the Devil, and that the evil spirits lying on them, procures that weight and oppression upon their heart', he observed. 'Though indeed we do grant, such a thing may be, but we suppose that this symptom proceeds oftenest from mere natural causes.'[72] By the early eighteenth century, though, popular educators identified the beliefs surrounding the nightmare experience as an unwelcome relic of 'superstition' perpetuating the pernicious belief in witches, spirits and ghosts. 'How many mistake the stagnation of their own Blood for being Hag-ridden?' complained Thomas Trenchard.[73] If the common people could be made to understand that nightmares were entirely natural and were given practical, natural cures to prevent attacks, then one more pillar holding up the 'temple of superstition' would be undermined. To this end, most of the numerous popular medical manuals produced during the eighteenth century had a section on the 'Incubus or Nightmare'. Some followed the advice of the influential physician Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654), recommending as a good cure peony seeds taken just before bedtime and in the morning.[74] For regular sufferers the *Domestic Physician* suggested a combination of gentle purges, bleeding of the feet and the ingestion of powders of nitre and cinnabar. If that did not work one could always try Philip Woodman's disgusting concoction consisting of pigeon and peacock dung mixed with salt of amber. If the reader could not stomach that, then he also suggested the following: 'Take the Head of a dry'd Toad, and of a Swallow, and one Ounce of Male Peony Roots, cut into very small bits, put them all into a Black Silk Bag, and let it be hung about the Parties Neck.'[75] Preventative medicine was best, of course, and so the manuals warned sufferers not to indulge in heavy suppers or too much drink before bedtime, and not to sleep on their backs, all of which are recommended for sufferers today. William Buchan's highly successful and much reprinted *Domestic Medicine* further advised that 'deep thought, anxiety, or any thing that oppresses the mind, ought to be avoided'.[76] With this warning in mind we turn to the horrors of the conscious state.

HALLUCINATION

With the rise of psychiatry during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the development of more sophisticated categories of insanity, the medical fraternity paid more serious attention to people's claims to have seen visions of the dead. Such hallucinations were no longer easily dismissed as merely the products of dreams and religious enthusiasm, or ascribed to the now outmoded notion of melancholy. The medical fraternity began to move beyond explaining the symptoms and physical causes of apparitions. They increasingly sought to explore *why* the mind created such internal visions and to consider *what* people thought they saw. In the 1830s the physician and writer Robert Macnish, who had experienced his own fair share of visions, wondered,

> why should a ghost be dressed in red rather than blue, and why should it smile rather than grin? These are minutiae beyond the reach of investigation, a least in the present state of our knowledge.[77]

Hallucinations and dream experiences were normalised. It was recognised that the perfectly sane could experience visual and aural hallucinations, that disorders of perception were not necessarily disorders of the mind. Consciousness could be deceptive. The likes of the poet Coleridge and the novelist Walter Scott could talk freely of the apparitions they had seen without fear of being considered mad. Coleridge, who had an active interest in scientific discovery, when once asked if he believed in ghosts, replied, 'No, Madam; I have seen too many myself.'[78]

In England, the physician John Ferriar (1761–1815) was at the forefront of this movement towards medical normalisation. Informed by his work as physician at the 'lunatic' hospital attached to the Manchester Infirmary, Ferriar published *An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions* in 1813. He discussed how 'spectral delusions' were 'frequently experienced by healthy person' when strong impressions of the past stimulated the visual nerves. Other studies followed that repeated or developed Ferriar's views, most notably Samuel Hibbert's *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions* (1824), in which he suggested that 'The objects of mental contemplation, may be seen as distinctly as external objects.'[79] These set the foundations for later studies, such as James Sully's psychological study of illusions, in which he discussed the 'Hallucinations of Normal Life'. As most ghosts were seen at night, Sully suggested that these 'visions' were the 'debris of dreams' lingering briefly during the first moment of waking consciousness. He concluded with satisfaction that this explained 'the genesis of ghosts, and of the reputation of haunted houses'.[80]

During the same period that early psychiatry was redefining the meaning of apparitions, dual advances were also being made in the science of optics and the physiology of the eye. These too were enthusiastically employed to explain away ghosts. While unconscious visions could be attributed purely to the workings of the mind, conscious, daytime apparitions demanded a consideration of the retina. The scientific investigator and populariser David Brewster (1781–1868) was particularly confident that the eye was the key to unlocking the phenomenon of ghosts, calling it 'the principal seat of the supernatural'.[81] In his *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832), Brewster brought together all the natural explanations that science could muster to explain away apparitions, with discourses on magic lanterns, the manipulation of mirrors, reflections and ventriloquism. More to the point, 'Letter III' included a lengthy account of the various aural and visual hallucinations of 'Mrs A', among them the vision of her deceased mother-in-law. There then followed an explanation of how such apparitions were caused by the projection of retinal images. According to Brewster, the 'mind's eye' was the 'body's eye', and the retina was the 'tablet' on which all visual impressions were created. The eye was an organ of ideas as well as the brain. So, ghosts were first and foremost physiological rather then mental creations. The idea that the eye could project retinal images transmitted by the brain was not founded on the strongest of medical foundations, even by the standards of knowledge on nerve function at the time.[82] What of the blind who were subjected to spectral illusions? Brewster admitted that 'it is not probable that we shall ever be able to understand the actual manner in which a person of sound mind beholds spectral apparitions in the broad light of day'.

Whatever the explanation, physiological or psychological, there still had to be some physical stimulation to trigger hallucinations of ghosts in the sane. There was no reason to discard the old medical explanations for temporary mental disorder, such as drink, drugs, intense ideas inspired by religion or literature, digestive or circulatory problems, and feverish illnesses. In the early nineteenth century John Alderson, senior physician at the Hull General Infirmary, set out to

> prove, that the belief in apparitions, ghosts, and spectres, is not only well founded, but these appearances are perfectly natural, arising from secondary physical causes, and depending on circumstances to which all nations, all mankind, are equally liable.[83]

To this end, he recounted a series of case studies from his years in medical practice, from which he argued that people experienced a variety of hallucinatory experiences that were similar to but not symptomatic of insanity,

delirium, somnambulism or irrationality. There was the case of a man who had, on returning from America, suffered from severe headaches and a swollen throat, who began to experience vivid dreams. 'He had been hitherto, he said, an unbeliever in ghosts, but had certainly been tormented by spectres during the night when perfectly awake. He felt himself sane.'[84] Alderson agreed. Another patient suffering from what he called a 'nervous complaint', and who experienced ghostly visitations, was reluctant to admit to his visions for fear of being considered foolish or mad. When his wife left the room he unwillingly agreed when Alderson 'told him I knew he imagined he saw people in his room whom he did not wish to see, and others whom he knew to be dead'.[85]

However, the normalisation of ghost hallucination presented several conceptual and diagnostic problems. How did one know, for example, if conscious visions of the dead were products of an overactive but healthy mind, or symptomatic of incipient mental illness? In other words, what distinguished an unhealthy from a healthy apparition? It was clear that the authoress Catherine Crowe was suffering a bout of mental illness in February 1854 after being found naked, saying that spirits had told her she was invisible.[86] The conviction of being persecuted by ghosts certainly indicated an abnormal mental state. Other signs could also be found in the physical state of the dead as visualised in hallucinations. Seeing decomposing corpses was not normal. Take, for example, the 38-year-old woman admitted to Bethlem Asylum in 1796. She suffered from a persecution complex and delusions. She frequently saw at her bedside the ghost of a young man of whom she was fond and who had died some years before. He did not appear in his living state, though, but 'in a state of putrefaction, which left an abominable stench in her room'.[87] In another case a lawyer of 'good education and literary habits' had, during a severe chest infection in 1823, reported seeing on several occasions the vision of a young lady he knew, who had died two years before. He understood the apparition to be no more than a hallucination, and found the experience pleasing. Several years later, and now fully recovered, 'some circumstances occurred which produced in him great mental excitement'. Subsequently the apparition returned, but this time it was profoundly disturbing; her body assumed the form of a putrefied corpse he had seen dissected several years previously. He was plagued by the hallucination both day and night, and even when in company.[88]

For some educated commentators the move to normalise ghost hallucinations was a step too far. Psychiatrists or 'mad doctors' as they were derogatorily called, were widely criticised for blurring the boundaries between the objective and the subjective, between reason and madness. Concepts such as moral insanity – temporary episodes of madness in normal people triggered by external factors such as stress or drink – were widely condemned. It was

becoming impossible to know who was mad and who was not. Society could not function if such uncertainties were to be accepted. Lines had to be drawn, and ghosts were used as markers. In 1848, for example, the writer Charles Ollier stated:

> It may be laid down as a general maxim, that any one who thinks he has seen a ghost, may take the vision as a symptom that his bodily health is deranged … To see a ghost, is, *ipso facto*, to be a subject for the physician.[89]

It was in the courts and newspapers that reported on criminal trials though, that psychiatric concepts of hallucination were most publicly contested. Expressions of belief in witchcraft, magic and ghosts by an educated person were sometimes cited as evidence of insanity in murder trials and probate disputes.[90] In 1846, for instance, the will of William Thornhill was contested at the Derby assizes. It was alleged that Thornhill was a 'monomaniac'; in other words, someone suffering from an insanity characterised by a fixed delusion and obsessive preoccupation. In Thornhill's case this was exhibited by his views on supernatural agency. Devils, ghosts and angels were a favourite topic of conversation, and, as one witness testified, Thornhill believed 'that a man was a compound of spirit and body, and when the body dropped to the ground the spirit went somewhere, and he thought that sometimes the spirit assumed a form which became visible to the human eye'. He told another witness 'that the spirits of the departed could reassume the human form, but did so only upon extraordinary occasions'. When asked once if he had ever seen a 'bogle', he said no.[91] In 1890 the second husband of Elizabeth Webb, the widowed heiress to a large dairying business, contested her will on the grounds that she was delusional. As part of the evidence it was stated that she had once claimed she had been visited by the ghost of her first husband, and also that a fair-haired lady and her son appeared to her in a looking glass. As she experienced these 'delusions' some time after having made out her will, the jury found for the defendants.[92] Such attempts to use ghosts as the legal basis for claims of insanity rarely worked. Ghosts were too culturally pervasive to compartmentalise in medical terms and ultimately too widely believed in to pathologise. The surgeon Samuel Barnes testified, during a trial at the Exeter Assizes in March 1834, 'a belief of having seen apparitions is a proof of great weakness of mind, but not a proof of derangement; it arranges from weakness of intellect'.[93] Even that definition, a cautious conservative position for the time, would become redundant with the influence of spiritualism.

MAGICIANS AND 'BELLY SPEAKERS'

As David Brewster had shown in his *Letters on Natural Magic*, the mind could be manipulated not only by natural phenomena or internal impressions but also by deliberate manipulation of the external environment. There was nothing new in this observation though. Back in the late sixteenth century the witchcraft sceptic Reginald Scot had written a disquisition on the arts of legerdemain, illusion and trickery in order to undermine the belief in magic and spirit conjuration. In the following century the physician Thomas Ady did likewise. Furthermore, as we shall see in the chapter on 'ghost makers', early modern scientists also set out to mimic supposedly supernatural phenomena by the construction and use of automata and optical effects. In the age of the witch trials and capital laws against the practice of demonic magic there also existed, then, a tradition of practical and scientific debunking through the explanation and demonstration of supposedly miraculous phenomena. But it was only in the eighteenth century that stage magic and illusion was concertedly used in the service of popular enlightenment. By then the concept of witchcraft and diabolic intervention was intellectually on the wane. There was little risk of illusionists falling under authoritarian suspicion of the black arts, and therefore there was a greater freedom to practise what was often described as natural magic. The aim was not to deceive but to instruct and to expose the fallacy of 'superstition'. By the late eighteenth century most stage magicians, in both their acts, advertisements and publications, conscientiously espoused the Enlightenment cause. Philip Breslaw hoped, for instance, that his book of magic tricks, *Breslaw's Last Legacy: Or, the Magical Companion* (1784), would 'wipe many ill-grounded notions which ignorant people have imbibed'.[94] When the natural philosopher Joseph Priestley attempted a sensitive debunking of the Wesleys' supernatural explanations for the haunting of their Epworth home, he referred to Breslaw's powers of legerdemain. He suggested that it was understandable that those who saw his act and had no knowledge of his tricks 'would tell the story in such a manner as to imply a real miracle', but further explanation of his methods would show how mysterious phenomena could be 'produced in a natural way'.[95] Many stage magicians adopted the title 'Professor' to denote their role as educators and demonstrators of the rule of reason. Some described their acts as performances of 'experimental philosophy' or 'Mathematical Operations' rather than illusions or tricks.[96] Typical of the period was a show put on by John Mexville at the Lyceum in the Strand in May 1789, which was called 'Le Melange Amusant; Or, Undeceiving Exhibition'. This consisted of demonstrations of 'the modes of deceiving practised by Jugglers, Slight of Hand Men,

Fortune Tellers, and Natural Magicians', with the aim of preventing the public 'being dupes to sharpers and gamblers'.[97]

The changing status and rationale of stage magic and its role in debunking popular belief is well illustrated by the history of ventriloquism. Just as the eye could be deceived, so could the ear, and so the art of ventriloquism or 'belly speaking' had long been used to explain away spirits' communications.[98] Back in the late sixteenth century Reginald Scot had cited it as an explanation for the Witch of Endor's apparent success in making the spirit of the prophet Samuel speak. During the Cock Lane affair there was a strong suspicion amongst some that Elizabeth Parsons had used ventriloquism to generate the scratching and knocking noises through which the ghost supposedly communicated.[99] Yet in early modern England there was still considerable ambivalence at the time about the source of the ventriloquists' gift. Diabolic or spirit possession of the living was, after all, a significant component of numerous witchcraft accusations. One mid-seventeenth-century glossary hedged its bets and defined 'ventriloquist' in both a natural and supernatural sense as 'one that has an evil spirit speaking in his belly, or one that by use and practice can speake as it were out of his belly, not moving his lips'.[100] To underline the power of ventriloquism to generate a sense of spiritual presence we can turn to the fate of the merchant, concert promoter, bibliophile and occultist Thomas Britton (1644–1714). He apparently died after a friend, playing upon his belief in the spirit world, paid a ventriloquist to mimic the voice of God commanding him to get down on his knees and say the Lord's Prayer. Having obeyed the command he went home, took to his bed and died from the shock of the experience a few days later.[101]

A key text in promoting the rational force of ventriloquism was Jean-Baptiste de la Chapelle's large treatise *Le Ventriloque, ou L'Engastrimythe*, published in London and Paris in 1772, and subsequently translated into Dutch, Italian and Russian. La Chapelle explained away a large range of religious and magical aural phenomena from the Witch of Endor through to his own times, and highlighted the techniques and activities of ventriloquist hoaxers and charlatans and the folly of their dupes. La Chapelle recounted with particular pleasure the numerous tricks played by a consummate French ventriloquist, Monsieur Saint-Gille, including the time he mimicked the ghost of a dead monk. Sheltering in a monastery one day, during a thunderstorm, Saint-Gille found the brothers mourning the death of one of their order. While being shown his tomb, Saint-Gille threw his voice to make it sound as if the man's spirit was speaking from somewhere above them. The disembodied voice complained of the conditions in purgatory and reproached the friars for their lack of zeal in propelling his soul to Heaven. Chastened, the whole religious community was gathered to

pray and say mass for his soul, with Saint-Gille amusing himself at their expense by providing a running commentary on their proceedings from the spirit of the dead man.[102] A similar prank was attributed to an English ventriloquist named Fitz-James, who made his name in Paris around 1800. While walking in a cemetery one day, he espied a family praying by a tomb. The mischievous ventriloquist threw his voice to make it seem as though the occupant of the tomb was speaking, thereby frightening the mourners out of their wits.[103]

There is only a little, anecdotal evidence regarding eighteenth-century professional ventriloquism in England, but it would seem that for much of the century practitioners of the art plied their trade at fairs, markets, race days and inns, pretty much as their counterparts had done in previous centuries. This was certainly the environment in which James Burne, or 'Shelford Tommy' as he was popularly known, performed, making quite a reputation for himself in and around Nottingham during the 1780s.[104] Towards the end of the century, however, it would seem that the ventriloquists gravitated towards the theatre stage. In July 1796, for instance, a notice in *The Times* announced the appearance of Thomas Askins at Sadler's Wells, describing him as the first 'possessor of that wonderful Power' to appear before a theatrical audience. He was back again in London for a long run in 1799.[105] His success in the capital made the one-legged Askins one of the most celebrated practitioners of the period. His real name was Thomas Haskey, from Walsall in Staffordshire. He lost his leg in the war with America, and on being discharged and given a pension he returned to Staffordshire, earning a little extra income from local gardeners by making holes with his wooden leg for planting potatoes. It was at this time that he first discovered his gift for ventriloquism and soon attracted a local reputation. There is no evidence as to how he came to the notice of London theatre managers, but he was so successful at Sadler's Wells that in 1796 he earned some £200.[106] The self-styled 'Rational Mystic' William Belcher met Askins just before his run at Sadler's Wells, and was told by the ventriloquist that his vocal skill was not of his own devising, claiming 'that the voice came a few years before of itself, and that it sometimes alarmed his wife in the night'. This led Belcher to describe Askins's ventriloqual voice as his 'familiar', for he knew 'not a more proper appellation'.[107]

Much of the ventriloquists' repertoire focused on showing the immobility of their mouths whilst singing, counting to 20 or the like. During Askins' performance of the latter feat a candle was held just in front of his lips for the benefit of the audience. Another favourite act, which allowed for more diversionary techniques to be employed, concerned the holding of a conversation with an imaginary person concealed some distance away, such as with a chimney sweep stuck up a chimney. Then there was the trick of making

animals talk. One practitioner performed with a large dog whose jaw he would move with his hand to give the impression that it was speaking, while James Burne once frightened a servant girl by making a dead fish appear to say 'don't cut my head off' just as she was about to prepare it.[108] As to giving voice to inanimate objects, the ventriloquist's dummy, now a standard prop, only came into its own during the late eighteenth century, it would seem.[109] In England, amongst its earliest users was Burne, who had a wooden 'ill-shaped' doll that he kept in his pocket. Askins also employed a puppet, which he danced on his knee and held in his arms.[110]

To invest a puppet with the semblance of life was one thing, but to give the impression of communicating with the dead was another. As we have seen, it was an idle prank attributed to some ventriloquists, but it was another matter altogether to recreate such a trick in front of a formal audience. For obvious reasons no ventriloquist was going to use an actual cadaver as part of their act. Such a trick would have attracted immediate accusations of necromancy in the early modern period, while matters of taste kept such an idea suppressed in subsequent centuries, even in an era when public dissections were popular theatre. Still, one could easily create the impression of talking with the invisible spirits of the dead, as it was technically no different from creating conversations with chimney-bound sweeps. Around 1800, one celebrated conjuror told the Hull physician John Alderson that by burning a mix of antimony, sulphur and other chemicals in a confined room he could make a person 'fancy he saw spectres and apparitions; and that, by throwing his voice into a particular part of the room, he could make the person believe he was holding converse with spirits'.[111] As we shall see in the next chapter, coupling ventriloquism with magic lantern images also created a similar startling effect.

No ventriloquist was more determined in his pursuance of the Enlightenment mission that the Scottish magician John Rannie, who became the first and most celebrated ventriloquist in America.[112] Rannie began his first tour in Boston in 1801, while his younger brother James put on performances in New York City. In the spring of 1802 the brothers briefly joined forces before James decided to return to Britain. Over the next few years John built up his reputation touring up and down the eastern seaboard, even putting in a stint in the West Indies. Rannie advertised himself not just an entertainer but as a missionary of rationalism, whose aim was 'to remove the cobwebs of imposition from the eyes of ALL mankind' and 'to open the eyes of those who still foster an absurd belief in GHOSTS, WITCHES, CONJURATIONS, DEMONIACS, &c.'.[113] To that end the centrepiece of one of his acts was a demonstration of how the Witch of Endor used ventriloquism to fool Saul. In Boston, and no doubt elsewhere, this public debunking of a Bible ghost did not go down too well

with some devout Protestants, and in his publicity material Rannie made much of the opposition he faced from benighted 'fanaticism'. His crusade received public support from the deistic journal *Prospect*, run by the blind polemicist Elihu Palmer.[114] Palmer had long waged a campaign against what he called 'supernatural theology'. In his book *Principles of Nature*, first published in New York in 1801, and later in several London editions, he remarked that 'the story of the witch of Endor is too contemptible for serious remark', and repeatedly mocked the belief in ghosts. Mankind was 'constantly insulted with a thousand incongruous and non-existent relations, such as ghosts, witches, and devils,' he said, 'which perpetually disturb the imagination, and draw the rational faculties into the vortex of fancy and fanaticism'.[115]

Another public advocate of both John Rannie's skills and his Enlightenment project was William Pinchbeck, author of the first exposition of stage magic printed in America, *The Expositor; Or, Many Mysteries Unravelled* (1805). In the same year he also published *Witchcraft or the Art of Fortune-Telling*, which was an exposé of the tricks of fortune-tellers and astrologers, whom he described as the deceivers of the 'weak and credulous'.[116] In *The Expositor* he laid out his aim to 'oppose the idea of supernatural agency in any production of man'. He announced:

> We may rationally conclude that superstition's baneful effects are these, – retarding the human capacity, operating dangerously on society, and destructive to the common interest of mankind.[117]

Pinchbeck, who described himself as a 'mechanic and a philosopher', was also a showman who had some success in 1798 touring the eastern states with a card-reading Learned Pig. Like the Rannies, he was a relatively recent immigrant from across the Atlantic. The Pinchbecks were a well-known family of eighteenth-century London inventors, clockmakers and automata makers. Christopher Pinchbeck (d. 1732) founded the business, setting up shop in Clerkenwell and then Fleet Street, while also displaying his wares at Bartholomew Fair in association with the famous juggler and conjuror Isaac Fawkes. He also did a successful sideline in gold trinkets made from his own alloy of copper and zinc, which was known as pinchbeck. Christopher's son, Edward, took over the shop while his other son, Christopher, set himself up in the same line of business and displayed mechanical wonders in a room above his shop. Christopher died in 1783 and his son-in-law, a tobacconist, ran the shop for a few years but auctioned off all the stock in 1788.[118]

During the 1820s and 1830s the debunking message was still being peddled by the illusionists. An advertisement for the celebrated English impressionist and ventriloquist William Love (1806–1867) was a classic of its kind. His

entertainments, it was announced, were 'constructed with a view of creating an hour's amusement' but to

> the historical Student and Antiquarian, his productions cannot fail to prove a source of considerable interest and gratification, as they will satisfactorily elucidate the nature of the means which were resorted to in remote ages, to impose upon the superstitious multitudes.[119]

But the bold Enlightenment cause that had characterised the magician's *raison d'être* during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had certainly become more discreet by the 1830s. A few decades later, however, stage magicians' re-engagement with the Enlightenment mission was reinvigorated by the rise of spiritualism.

From the 1860s onwards, spiritualist seances become more elaborate and more theatrical in their presentation. Mimicking the simple rappings or table-turning of early spiritualism was simple and dull fair for a paying audience. But as spiritualist performances become increasingly centred on spectacular physical as well as aural communication with the dead, the magicians could base whole shows on debunking the various forms of supposed spirit manifestation. There were apports, for example, which were objects that the spirits produced out of nowhere, such as the flowers and fruit that appeared at the seances of the celebrated medium Mrs Guppy. Slate-writing and musical spirits were easily reproduced by the magicians. In the 1870s the magicians were given further fuel by the vogue for physical materialisations of the dead. These were sometimes only disembodied hands seen and felt by the sitters, but some mediums were bold enough to introduce full materialisations, such as the spirit Lily called up by the medium Kate Cook. In fact as magic catalogues of the period show, mediums and magicians were borrowing from the same sources. For sale were such items as 'Luminous Materialist Ghosts and Forms', 'Rapping Hands' and 'etherialization' kits that enabled mediums and magicians 'to produce any number of spirit forms, in the perfect dark, which have the appearance of a fine, misty, luminous vapor'.[120]

Two London institutions in particular became centres for the public exposure of the mediums' tricks. The first to act as a base camp was the Royal Polytechnic Institute, founded at considerable expense by private investors in 1838 to promote the popular understanding of science and art.[121] Advertisements in the 1860s described it as 'the most liberal shilling's worth in London'.[122] To achieve its worthy aims the Institute's lecturers were also showmen, wrapping nuggets of scientific knowledge in visual and aural entertainment. Sometimes the science sold itself with lectures and displays on such cutting-edge wonders

as electricity, photography, telephones and film. But the Institute's managers were constantly struggling to get the public through its doors, and so there was a heavy reliance on such entertainments as ventriloquial acts, magic lantern shows, dioramas, juggling and stage magic. The sensation caused by spiritualism provided an ideal vehicle for the popular scientific exposure of ghosts, spirits and mediums. During the mid 1870s the Polytechnic staged mock seances by its own 'Polytechnic Medium', which included a discourse on the

> conception of Ghosts and Spirits in the natural instinct of a non-material existence, various shapings of thought – Pre-Adamite Genii – Vampyres – Fetiches and Ghosts – *The Churchyard Ghost* – The modern materialised spirit.[123]

A decade before this, though, the Polytechnic lecturer 'Professor' James Matthews (d. 1880) was illustrating how spiritual materialisations could be faked in his magic shows. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s he divided his time working for the Polytechnic and Joseph Bland's Conjuring Repository in New Oxford Street, giving talks and demonstrations such as 'Conjuring Made Easy' and 'Illustrations of Modern Magic'.[124] In September 1864 Matthews went on a provincial tour with a show called 'Ancient and Modern Magic', and took with him the apparatus to stage a sensational new ghost illusion. As a surviving handbill announced: 'The Ghost! The Ghost!! The Ghost!!! See and Believe!!!'[125] The nature of the illusion and its cultural impact will be discussed in the next chapter, but suffice it to say for the moment that one of its inventors was Matthews's colleague, the chemist and illusionist John Henry Pepper (1821–1900).[126] In fact Pepper, who gave his name to the ghost illusion, was the most successful and well-known lecturer at the Polytechnic, and was its honorary director for two decades. Indeed, much of the Polytechnic's success during the 1860s was due to 'Pepper's Ghost'. In the spring of 1872 Pepper fell out with the management of the Polytechnic, however, and set up a 'Theatre of Popular Science and Entertainment' at the Egyptian Hall, as part of which he put on shows demonstrating that he could 'imitate any of the apparent miracles of spiritualism'. He nevertheless thought that there was 'something in it worthy of careful scientific investigation'.[127] Despite his high profile, Pepper's residence at the Egyptian Hall was a flop and he left Britain to tour the Unites States and Australia over the next decade.

During the late nineteenth century the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly became the new centre for the ghost-busting magicians. Built in 1812 with its impressive facade based on an ancient Egyptian temple, it originally housed a museum of natural history. After a few years it became a general exhibition centre with

its various lecture rooms and galleries rented out for painting exhibitions, concerts, and living exhibits such as Siamese twins and giants. In 1865 the ventriloquist and magician Colonel Stodare rented a room at the Hall and created quite a sensation presenting a recently developed illusion known as the Sphinx. There is no evidence that his act at the Hall contained any spirit debunking, and he died in 1866 aged only 35, but a few years before he had written a brief *Hand-book of Magic* in which he explained an illusion called 'palingenesy, or the art of reviving the dead', as well as how to 'make the image of a deceased person to appear'.[128] However, it was in 1873, a year after Pepper's show had failed there, that the Hall became the adopted home of spirit debunking, with the beginning of a long residency by the self-styled 'royal illusionists and anti-spiritualists' John Nevil Maskelyne and his partner George Alfred Cooke.[129] Their shows ran continuously until the demolition of the building in 1904, and consisted not only of straightforward magic displays but also anti-spiritualist farces such as 'Lady Daffodil Downy's Seance'.[130]

The early career of Maskelyne and Cooke was boosted, like others of the magical fraternity, by replicating the Davenports' famous spirit cabinet and exposing them as frauds. As young boys Ira and William Davenport lived in Rochester at the time the Fox sisters became big news. Several years later they began giving their own rather crude seances in darkened rooms. Around 1855, and still in their teens, they developed the idea of having themselves tied to chairs and shut in a wooden cabinet. Once the lights were turned down the usual inane spirit phenomena would then occur around the cabinet, such as objects being thrown around and tambourines being struck. The cabinet provided an idea cover for the boys to escape from the ropes with which they were tied, and slip discretely out of the box to perform the various spirit tricks before slipping their hands through the knotted ropes again. It was all very simple really, but the Davenports were amongst the first mediums to make the spirits perform rather than provide more sober communications through raps and knocks, while their youth and charm helped disarm audiences. After several years building up a reputation in America, the Davenports arrived in London in 1864 for an eventful though largely successful European tour. Their tricks were exposed several times, but as with other mediums, they still managed to pull in large audiences. Within weeks British magicians were putting on their own shows exposing the Davenport's techniques; advertisements for both nestling together in the London press. While the Davenports were giving their last London seance at the Hanover Square Rooms at the beginning of November, 'Professor' Redmond was putting on a show entitled 'The Brothers Davenport Challenged' at the London Pavilion Music Hall, Piccadilly. Meanwhile, not far away, at St James's Hall, the ubiquitous magician 'Professor' John Henry

Anderson, also known as the 'Wizard of the North', was holding his first public 'anti-spiritualistic seance'.[131]

The Polytechnic, the Egyptian Hall and their founding ethos – popular education through entertainment – were products of their era, and ill-suited to the cultural developments of the early twentieth century. In 1882 Quintin Hogg, a wealthy merchant and philanthropist, bought the Polytechnic, which was by then in poor financial state, and turned it into a successful but sober educational establishment with a strong religious emphasis.[132] In 1904 the Egyptian Hall, which had become popularly known as the 'Home of Mystery', was demolished, though Maskelyne continued his successful career performing elsewhere, teaming up for a while with the up-and-coming magician David Devant. The rise of the Music Hall helped to undermine 'scientific' entertainment; World War I understandably gave new impetus to the spiritualist movement, and between the world wars the populist newspapers and cinema helped to restore rather than undermine the presence of the supernatural.

* * *

Behind the attempts to explain ghost belief in terms of deception, delusion, hallucination and dreams lay the goal of vanquishing it. Ghosts were pernicious figments that had damaging social and personal consequences. Even the early psychiatrists, who stood up for the normality of ghost-*seeing* did not argue likewise for ghost-*belief*. During the twentieth century, however, belief once again achieved considerable intellectual currency. The social and cultural reasons for this will be examined at the end of this book, but this is the appropriate moment to mention the role of psychoanalysis in this process. In the writings on the subject by Freud and his adherents we can clearly see the influence of the various historical debates described in this chapter – melancholy, dream interpretation, nightmares, hallucination, and formative childhood experience. What the early-twentieth-century psychoanalysts, heavily influenced by anthropological studies, added to the debate was a clearer sense of the universality of ghosts' psychological function and the cultural reasons for belief in them. They also left aside the question of their reality. As Jung wrote, accounts of ghosts should be taken 'for what they are, *psychic facts*', and the analyst should not 'pooh-pooh them because they do no fit into our scheme of things'.[133]

Freud briefly considered the meaning of ghosts in his studies on dreams, taboos and bereavement, but he never gave concerted attention to the subject despite recognising their cultural and psychological significance.[134] In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), for instance, he suggested that ghost belief was generated by the repression of disturbing and conflicting feelings of hostility and affection

towards the dead. One of Freud's pupils, Ernest Jones, developed the idea, arguing that dreams of the dead, along with nightmares, related to childhood parental conflict, in particular the expression of repressed death wishes and guilt over incestuous relations.[135] It was left to others, though, to explore the broader cultural and psychological significance of ghosts. Those studying the psychology of child-rearing in non-Western societies found Freudian conflict theory particularly insightful. In the 1950s John Whiting argued, from his study of the Kwoma of New Guinea, that a preoccupation with parental ghosts was linked with anxieties caused by the lengthy or frequent absence of parents. As another psychologist observed, 'It follows from this that in societies where someone is always around and prepared to gratify a child's need immediately, fear of ghosts ought to be low.'[136] One could update the point and consider the impact of parenting trends in modern England, where in many families both parents now work. Freudian psychoanalytical explanations for ghosts, and those developed by Jungians for that matter, may have had little direct influence on public understanding, but twentieth-century psychiatry, through its absorption by the creative mass media, did contribute to a growing sense of the reasonableness of believing in ghosts.