



Fiction and the Supernatural
Professor John Mullan

14 April 2021

Sometimes a novel seems to be asking its reader if he or she believes in ghosts.

Take a very recent example.

Thomas Cromwell has been tumbled from power, at the orders of the King. He is imprisoned in the Tower of London, accused of treason and heresy. He is taken to his appointed chambers, where important condemned men are accommodated before they are executed.

"The doors are opened into the lower room. It is a stony, vaulted and spacious chamber. The fireplace is empty and swept clean. The walls here are twelve feet thick, and light falls from windows set high above the head. There is a figure sitting at the table. Silently he asks, 'Is it you?' Thomas More rises from his place, crosses the room and melts into the wall."

Hilary Mantel, The Mirror and the Light (2020), Part Six, I 'Mirror'

Everything that is seen in these three novels is seen through Cromwell's eyes. Our protagonist is not, it is fair to say, a superstitious man. As novel readers, we have relied on his clear-eyed rationality for the previous 1908 pages. Yet now? Isn't that a ghost he sees, melting into the wall in the cheapest of cinematic supernatural tricks?

Cromwell has played his part in having More executed, five years earlier. While waiting for death, More has been a tenant of the same chambers. If ghosts did exist, how natural that his spirit should return to spook the man who did away with him.

But, of course, the point of the narrative is that we have no way of knowing the status of Cromwell's vision. His question - 'Is it you?' – is silent and unanswered. But our protagonist does not pull himself together and tell himself that it was all a trick of his fevered and affrighted imagination.

Most books in which ghosts appear are written by authors who do not believe in them. Not quite so with books by Hilary Mantel. Here is the opening chapter of her memoir, teasingly entitled *Giving Up the Ghost*, and narrated in the same present tense that she uses in all three of her Thomas Cromwell novels.

"About eleven o'clock, I see a flickering on the staircase. The air is still; then it moves. I raise my head. The air is still again. I know it is my stepfather's ghost coming down. Or, to put it in a way acceptable to most people, I "know" it is my stepfather's ghost. I am not perturbed. I am used to "seeing" things that aren't there. Or—to put it in a way more acceptable to me—I am used to seeing things that "aren't there." It was in this house that I last saw my stepfather, Jack, in the early months of 1995: alive, in his garments of human flesh. Many times since then I have acknowledged him on the stairs."

Hilary Mantel, Giving Up the Ghost. A Memoir (2003), Part One

It is a suitably unsettling, but also funny, beginning for an unsettling and funny book. Look at those quotations marks. Most of us would find it acceptable that she “knows” – that is, she *supposedly* knows that it is her stepfather’s ghost. We all get funny ideas. “Seeing” is in inverted commas because we would think that she is only *supposedly* seeing anything. But then she corrects this: “aren’t there” is in inverted commas because they *supposedly* aren’t there (but are).

Mantel is one of the novelists who has opened literary fiction in new ways to the supernatural – though, in reality – as I hope I shall show – she is awakening spirits that have flitted through English fiction of earlier ages.

Mantel’s first published novel opens by introducing us to Mrs Axon, a widow who lives in a suburban road somewhere in England and makes a little extra money by conducting séances. She is convinced that her house (‘a nice detached property’) is haunted by mischief-making spirits, to whom she has abandoned the spare bedroom. In the first chapter of the novel, she finds a crumpled piece of paper on the hall floor.

“The wavering great letters were familiar by now, fly-track thin: GO NOT TO THE KITCHIN TODAY.

Evelyn’s heart sank. Like this, they prolonged her existence. They could take her at any time, kill her (broken neck at the foot of the stairs), or leave her a shell without faculties. But they preferred to watch her fear, her pathetic ruses, her flickering hopes which they would dash within the hour; that was the only explanation. Disconsolate, she entered the front parlour. There, placed precisely in the centre of the circular table, lay a tin-opener.”

Hilary Mantel, Every Day Is Mother’s Day (1985), Chapter 1

A tin-opener! Modern ghosts and ghouls can use any household implement to inflict their terrors. Mantel’s narration has the author’s articulacy, but stays within the character’s consciousness, her field of vision. She never doubts that her house is haunted.

In fact, as we might say, there is another explanation. She has a daughter Muriel, in her 20s, living with her. Muriel is, we would say, ‘learning disabled’, though the descriptions of her offered by others in the novel– even by the representatives of social services – are rather crueler. It is the 1980s. But the novel also inhabits Muriel’s consciousness. She is more cunning than her mother knows, and is the agent behind those tormenting spirits. The terrifying tin-opener was shop-lifted by Muriel on one of her outings ...

But Mrs Axon *is* being pursued by a vengeful spirit, in a sense.

It is places that are haunted.

The entrance of the supernatural into English fiction begins with a special place – and begins as a joke.

Here is the title page of the first edition of the first Gothic novel, published on Christmas Eve 1764 – on the author’s own private printing press.

It presents itself as a fragment of antiquity.

In the second edition, the title page declared it to be not ‘A Story’ but ‘A Gothic Story’. This was the first time that the adjective ‘Gothic’ has been applied to a narrative.

It is a story of a tyrannical Prince, Manfred, who, after the shocking, supernatural death of his only son, crushed beneath a giant helmet that was fixed to a huge statue, decides to divorce his wife and take his son's bride-to-be as his new wife. She flees his lustful designs.

Most of the action takes place in his castle and the nearby chapel – and in a series of secret tunnels and passages.

All the characters are haunted by apprehensions. In what will become a timeless convention of supernatural tales, servants readily believe in ghosts, while their social superiors try hard not to. Here it is Bianca, the maid servant of Manfred's daughter, Matilda, sharing her fears with her mistress.

"Blessed Mary!" said Bianca, starting, "there it is again! Dear Madam, do you hear nothing? this castle is certainly haunted!"

"Peace!" said Matilda, "and listen! I did think I heard a voice—but it must be fancy: your terrors, I suppose, have infected me."

"Indeed! indeed! Madam," said Bianca, half-weeping with agony, "I am sure I heard a voice."

"Does anybody lie in the chamber beneath?" said the Princess.

"Nobody has dared to lie there," answered Bianca, "since the great astrologer, that was your brother's tutor, drowned himself."

Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto, Ch. II

For much of the eighteenth century, the novel, this new genre, had strived to show how an invented world could be measured by standards of probability. Now Walpole playfully admitted to fiction the possibility of supernatural visitation. But you had to be in the right place: Walpole foresaw the importance of old buildings to Gothic fiction.

Walpole loved medieval buildings so much that he made himself one to live in.

In 1747, he purchased a house and grounds by the Thames in Twickenham which he called 'Strawberry Hill' (typically, he recovered the name from an old deed). Over the next six years, in consultation with his 'Strawberry Committee' of friends and fellow 'Goths' (especially Richard Bentley and John Chute), he turned it into a neo-Gothic showpiece, complete with battlements and papier-mâché fan-vaulting, chimney pieces modelled on medieval tombs and bookcases mimicking abbey choirs.

Here it is!

But it was Ann Radcliffe, in the 1790s, who made the new genre of what we have come to call 'Gothic fiction' not just famous but also – to some extent – respectable.

Here is a typical extract from her second novel, *A Sicilian Romance*. ('Romance', incidentally, was the word that Radcliffe and her contemporaries used for what we call 'Gothic fiction'.) Two sisters, Emilia and Julia, daughters of the tyrannical Marquis Mazzini, are with their governess, Madame de Menon, in their father's lonely castle on the coast of Sicily. Much of the castle is locked up and supposedly uninhabited. One night they are in the company of their mentor ...

"They were engaged in interesting discourse, when madame, who was then speaking, was interrupted by a low hollow sound, which arose from beneath the apartment, and seemed like the closing of a door. Chilled into a silence, they listened and distinctly heard it repeated. Deadly ideas crowded upon their imaginations, and inspired a terror which scarcely allowed them to breathe. The noise lasted only for a moment, and a profound silence soon ensued."

Ann Radcliffe, A Sicilian Romance, Ch. IV

There are plenty more signs that something stirs in the castle's locked apartments – though for most of the novel the two sisters are more in danger from various predatory aristocratic males and nameless banditti.

Radcliffe's bestseller was her fourth novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Her orphaned heroine, Emily St Aubert, accompanies her aunt to the remote castle of Udolpho, in the Apennines. It belongs to her aunt's new husband, the brooding, tyrannical Count Montoni. It is a place of indistinct terrors, which take shape by night. In a process beautifully parodied in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Emily often lives out her fears in the dark at the end of one chapter – before waking at the beginning of another.

“... she almost fancied she saw shapes flit past her curtains and glide into the remote obscurity of her chamber.—The castle clock struck one before she closed her eyes to sleep.”

CHAPTER VI

*“I think it is the weakness of mine eyes,
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me!”*

JULIUS CAESAR

“Daylight dispelled from Emily's mind the glooms of superstition, but not those of apprehension ...”

The Mysteries of Udolpho II vi

Radcliffe pioneered the use of epigraphs at the head of each chapter, like this: Brutus's exclamation when he sees the ghost of Caesar.

Superstition – terror – rationalisation – rational apprehension: such is the repeated process. Always there are locked doors to be opened, veils and curtains to be pulled aside.

Radcliffe pioneered what is sometimes called the explained supernatural.

Every one of her novels features apparently supernatural events. Yet every single mysterious noise or flickering light or phantom-like vision has (eventually) a rational explanation.

Radcliffe was mocked in her own day for always explaining her bumps in the night. As if she did not have the courage of her imagination. Yet the 'explained supernatural' – the fear of the supernatural aroused, in order eventually to be dispelled - was her gift to the mainstream of English fiction.

(And not just classic novels. Some of tonight's audience might remember the TV cartoon series Scooby-Doo, the direct inheritor of Radcliffe's fictional techniques. Every week the big dog and his four human friends would encounter apparently supernatural goings on, only for the supernatural to be dispelled in the final sequence, with a ritual unveiling of the fancy-dress criminals.)

Ann Radcliffe's explicable mysteries continue to fascinate all novelists who wish to credit our fears of the supernatural. Here is the narrator of perhaps the greatest of all ghost stories the unnamed governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* - after she has first seen what might be the

apparition of the dead servant, Quint – standing staring at her from one of the castle-like towers of the lonely country house where she looks after two orphaned children.

“It was not that I didn’t wait, on this occasion, for more, for I was rooted as deeply as I was shaken. Was there a “secret” at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I can’t say how long I turned it over, or how long, in a confusion of curiosity and dread, I remained where I had had my collision; I only recall that when I re-entered the house darkness had quite closed in.”

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, Ch. IV

The narrator has read her novels. She refers to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* – both novels in which strange phenomena do have a rational explanation. James takes this business of rational explanation one step backwards: the reader may believe that his narrator is ‘seeing things that aren’t there’ (as Hilary Mantel puts it), but she herself comes to believe more and more fiercely in the supernatural origins of what she sees – and what the children in her charge, Miles and Flora, are experiencing.

James’s narrator reaches for the examples offered by Radcliffe and Brontë – but in order to repudiate them.

The ghost story as a genre is a separate thing. I would like to stay with those novelists like Charlotte Brontë who seem to toy with the supernatural – to admit it to the fringes of their otherwise ‘natural’ fictions.

Take Charlotte Brontë’s wonderful final novel *Villette*.

It is a first-person narrative told by a young woman called Lucy Snowe, who, after an unspecified family tragedy, leaves England to work as a teacher at a girls’ school – a *pensionnat* – in the city of ‘Villette’ (a fictionalised version of Brussels). The school has been built on the sight of a former nunnery and contains an enclosed garden. There, at the foot of an old pear tree, ‘you saw, in scraping away the mossy earth between the half-bared roots, a glimpse of slab, smooth, hard, and black’.

“The legend went, unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this was the portal of a vault, imprisoning deep beneath that ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive for some sin against her vow. Her shadow it was that tremblers had feared, through long generations after her poor frame was dust; her black robe and white veil that, for timid eyes, moonlight and shade had mocked, as they fluctuated in the night-wind through the garden-thicket.”

Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, Ch. XII, ‘The Casket’

You can hear Lucy’s disdain. This is the kind of ‘legend’ that easily gains traction, as one might say, amongst the silly, superstitious schoolgirls, pent up within the walls of the *pensionnat*.

But then, one day, Lucy, our unsuperstitious and sceptical narrator, receives a letter from the young English doctor to whom she has taken a scarcely confessed fancy. She retreats to the unoccupied garret of the school building, where the girls’ winter cloaks are hung, to read the precious missive in private. But she is disturbed.

“Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess haunted by the malefactor cloaks. I turned: my light was dim; the room was long—but as I live! I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber

a figure all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white.

Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed; this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN.

I cried out; I sickened.”

Charlotte Brontë, Villette, Ch. XXII, ‘The Letter’

Is our heroine suffering from some *maladie d’amour*? Or has the spirit of a girl once killed for love really visited another love-sick young woman?

None of these. We are not in a ghost story. Many chapters later, the supernatural is duly explained. Lucy’s most headstrong and worldly pupil, Ginevra Fanshawe, has eloped with the Comte de Hamal. She leaves a letter for Lucy, explaining how she and her admirer managed their assignations.

“Do you begin to comprehend by this time that M. le Comte de Hamal was the nun of the attic, and that he came to see your humble servant? I will tell you how he managed it. ... Nearly a year ago I chanced to tell him our legend of the nun; that suggested his romantic idea of the spectral disguise, which I think you must allow he has very cleverly carried out. But for the nun’s black gown and white veil, he would have been caught again and again both by you and that tiger-Jesuit, M. Paul. He thinks you both capital ghost-seers, and very brave.”

Charlotte Brontë, Villette, Ch. XL, ‘The Happy Pair’

Does this exactly explain away our narrator’s sickening? The supernatural has, after all, brought the disruptive energies of sexual yearning into the narrative.

Emily Brontë also seemed to invite spirits into her supposedly non-supernatural fiction.

When *Wuthering Heights* opens, Lockwood, the narrator, has rented the remote Thrushcross Grange and visits his neighbours at Wuthering Heights. A sudden snowstorm prevents his return and he has had to stay the night. He finds himself in the room that was once occupied by Catherine Earnshaw, and reads the books in which she has scribbled. Some of these are diary entries. Lockwood falls asleep as he reads and begins to dream. The bough of a tree is rattling against his window, so he knocks out a pane of glass and reaches out to it.

“... my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand! The intense horror of nightmare came over me: I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, ‘Let me in—let me in!’ ‘Who are you?’ I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself. ‘Catherine Linton,’ it replied, shiveringly (why did I think of Linton? I had read Earnshaw twenty times for Linton)—‘I’m come home: I’d lost my way on the moor!’ As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child’s face looking through the window. Terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, ‘Let me in!’ and maintained its tenacious grip, almost maddening me with fear ...”

Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights I iii

When he yells aloud, Heathcliff arrives. When Lockwood tells him a little of his nightmare, Heathcliff throws open the window and calls the spectre in.

Of course, this is another kind of ‘explained supernatural’. It was all just a dream. That’s what our narrator thinks – though Heathcliff thinks differently.

What Heathcliff tells Nelly Dean, is not what we have to believe.

“I have a strong faith in ghosts; I have a conviction that they can, and do, exist among us!”
Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Vol. II, Ch. XV

Wuthering Heights is artfully constructed so that we are always at one remove – and sometimes two or three removes – from the experiences of the main characters. Lockwood tells us what Nelly Dean tells him. And sometimes what she tells him is, in turn, what one of the other characters has told her.

Heathcliff's faith in ghosts is of a piece with all his other beliefs and passions and vengeful furies. We look in from the outside – only half-comprehending.

We end with a haunting episode, narrated by Nelly.

One evening, she has met a boy with some sheep out on the moor. He is crying.

“What is the matter, my little man?” I asked.
‘There’s Heathcliff and a woman yonder, under t’ nab,’ he blubbered, ‘un’ I darnut pass ‘em.’
I saw nothing; but neither the sheep nor he would go on so I bid him take the road lower down. He probably raised the phantoms from thinking, as he traversed the moors alone, on the nonsense he had heard his parents and companions repeat. Yet, still, I don’t like being out in the dark now; and I don’t like being left by myself in this grim house: I cannot help it; I shall be glad when they leave it, and shift to the Grange.”

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Vol. II, Ch. XX

(‘They’ being the young Cathy and Hareton Earnshaw, her cousin and bridegroom to be.)

Brontë ends by allowing her novel to be haunted by what its narrators cannot explain.

Charles Dickens, also consorted with the supernatural. His one-time collaborator George Augustus Sala recalled his tastes in a memoir that he wrote as an old man.

“What he liked to talk about was the latest new piece at the theatres, the latest exciting trial or police case, the latest social craze or social swindle, and especially the latest murder and the newest thing in ghosts.”

George Augustus Sala, *Things I Have Seen and People I Have Known* (1894)

‘The newest thing in ghosts’: he loved to hear about supposedly ‘true’ supernatural occurrences. Dickens was a pioneer of the ghost story (the theme for a different lecture), but he also arranged for the supernatural to seep into his novels.

In what many think Dickens's greatest anatomy of Victorian social ills, *Bleak House*, he includes an unaccountable supernatural element that is unnecessary to the workings of his plot.

Lady Dedlock is married to the stiff aristocrat, Sir Leicester Dedlock. She has a secret, whose discovery threatens her social standing and indeed her marriage. (We can guess what kind of secret it must be.) Early in the novel we find out from Sir Leicester's housekeeper, Mrs. Rouncewell, that there is an old legend about the Dedlock family. At the ancestral home in rural Lincolnshire, Chesney Wold, there is a terrace known as the Ghost's Walk. It is supposed to be haunted by a former Lady Dedlock, who quarrelled violently with her husband during the Civil War and died cursing the family. When sickness, death or disgrace are coming to the Dedlocks, the tread is heard on the Ghost's walk.

The novel's heroine and part-narrator, Esther Summerson, knows the legend. One day she is looking at the Ghost's Walk and 'picturing to myself the female shape that was said to haunt it' when she sees Lady Dedlock approaching her. The thought of the ghost is a prelude to Lady Dedlock's revelation that she is Esther's mother. The next day, in the aftershock, Esther wanders to the great house and finds herself on the Ghost's Walk.

"I was passing quickly on, and in a few moments should have passed the lighted window, when my echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk, that it was I who was to bring calamity upon the stately house and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything, retraced the way by which I had come, and never paused until I had gained the lodge-gate, and the park lay sullen and black behind me."

Charles Dickens, Bleak House (1852-3), Ch. XXXVI, 'Chesney Wold'

'An augmented terror of myself': as if the ghost is what she herself brings. And so it is.

Dickens, who always gave precise instructions to his illustrators, ensured that one of the novel's illustrations presented his readers with a suitably suggestive image of the Ghost's Walk. [see illustration]

He makes it more than a legend. When Lady Dedlock's secret is about to be revealed, Mrs. Rouncewell reports to her what seems to be just the ghostly sounds that legend predicts.

"My Lady, I came away last night from Chesney Wold to find my son in my old age, and the step upon the Ghost's Walk was so constant and so solemn that I never heard the like in all these years. Night after night, as it has fallen dark, the sound has echoed through your rooms, but last night it was awfulest. And as it fell dark last night, my Lady, I got this letter."

Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Ch. LV, 'Flight'

Characters come to believe in the ghostly sounds because they share the readers' sense of impending disaster.

Dickens is peculiarly daring in declining to explain away the supernatural.

You can see it in the illustrations that he approved for the one-volume edition of the novel, published 1853.

There, on facing pages, are the novel's two aspects: the haunted house facing the London street.

In the twenty-first century, there is still much to be said for this confrontation or juxtaposition. An extraordinary example is the brilliant novel that Hilary Mantel published before she embarked on her Thomas Cromwell trilogy, *Beyond Black*.

Alison is a corpulent medium, making her living by putting the punters of the London commuter-belt in touch with their dead relatives. If it is an act, it is one in which she believes. Her cynical sidekick, Colette, is less convinced, but the two work well together. In discrete sections of the narrative, Alison is pursued by spirits from her dark past, the nastiest of whom is a man called Morris, a foul-mouthed fiend who fiddles with his flies and was one of those who tormented and abused Al when she was a girl, in darkest Aldershot. Colette discusses these spirits with Alison.

"If Morris were earthside, she had once said to Al, and you and he were married, you could get rid of him easily enough; you could divorce him. Then if he bothered you, you could see a solicitor, take out an injunction. You could stipulate that he doesn't come within a five-mile radius, for example. Al sighed and said, in Spirit World it's not that simple. You can't just kick out your guide. You can try and persuade him to move on. You can hope he gets called away, or that he forgets to come home. But you can't leave him; he has to leave you. You can try and kick him out. You might succeed, for a while. But he gets back at you. Years may go by. He gets back at you when you're least expecting it.

So, Colette had said, you're worse off than if you were married."

Hilary Mantel, Beyond Black (2005), Ch. Two

Much worse off.

Of course, we can explain all this. It is all a metaphor for the creatures of her psyche, born of the terrors of her childhood.

Doesn't every celebrity caught doing bad things speak of their 'demons'?

How much like Ann Radcliffe do we want our novelists to be? Gothic lives on in contemporary literary fiction.

In her 1999 novel *Affinity*, Sarah Waters ingeniously exploited the explained supernatural.

In what I think is her best novel, *The Little Stranger*,

It is a novel that pivots on the question as to whether there is anything supernatural at work. It is a novel, naturally, about a huge, decaying old house, Hundreds Hall. It is owned by the Ayres family, short on cash, full of terrors about what the seemingly haunted house is doing to them.

The narrator is a man called Farraday, a doctor, not given to superstition.

Here we are near the very end of it.

Caroline Ayres has fallen to her death in the night. At the inquest, we find out from the terrified young servant girl that, before she falls, she has called out one word: 'You!'

We might remember Thomas Cromwell's silent question: 'Is it you?'

Caroline was the last member of the family to live in the house. Now it stands empty and crumbling. Farraday, who has a key, sometimes visits it and patrols it. What brought it to this?

"I've never attempted to remind Seeley of his other, odder theory: that Hundreds was consumed by some dark germ, some ravenous shadow-creature, some 'little stranger' spawned from the troubled unconscious of someone connected with the house itself. But on my solitary visits, I find myself growing watchful. Every so often I will sense a presence, or catch a movement at the corner of my eye, and my heart will give a jolt of fear and expectation: I'll imagine that the secret is about to be revealed to me at last; that I will see what Caroline saw, and recognize it, as she did.

If Hundreds Hall is haunted, however, its ghost doesn't show itself to me."

Sarah Waters, The Little Stranger (2009)

We are now in an age of what Farraday calls 'the troubled unconscious', a word not dreamt of by Walpole and Radcliffe. This is how the supernatural returns to fiction.

But, by definition, the unconscious is what we do not really know. The ghost does not show itself to Waters's narrator. Of course not: like Esther in *Bleak House*, though never so innocently, he himself has brought the haunting. His unacknowledged resentments and obsessions have given birth to that 'little stranger'. The other inhabitants of the house, now dead or driven away, were right to believe in ghosts.

© Professor Mullan, 2021