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An Event Without An Object: The Cock Lane Ghost, London 1762–1763

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Abstract: This article treats the Cock Lane Ghost—a supposed ghost and popular spectacle in London in 1762—as an event that was seen at the time as neither supernatural nor a product of the imagination but rather as a mobile ‘non-empirical ideality’ that had a remarkable range of tangible effects. Despite attempts to reduce this wayward fiction to a fixed material object, the unseen ghost was also treated as a mirror or window that could display the shifting religious and political tensions of the time. The multiplicity of reactions and the sheer discursive flexibility of the ghost make it a spectacle *of* London in 1762–1763.

Keywords: Cock Lane Ghost, London 1762–1763, Addison, Johnson, Hogarth, Garrick, Goldsmith, popular spectacle, Peter Otto, non-empirical idealities

An Event without an Object

The Cock Lane Ghost, which fascinated London in early 1762, was prompted by the death of Fanny Lynes in 1759 and the mysterious knocking sounds heard in the Parsons’s house in Cock Lane in 1761 which led to William Kent being accused of the murder of Fanny Lynes by the ‘ghost’ of Cock Lane. It was reported in the London papers that, when interviewed by different religious and secular authorities, the ‘ghost’ would knock once to respond in the affirmative and twice to answer in the negative. The Cock Lane ghost attracted the literati of the day and led to the direct intervention in the affair of Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson. David Garrick, William Hogarth and Horace Walpole would all use the Cock Lane ghost as a useful or even necessary fiction to address the pressing political events and religious tensions of London in 1762–1763 (Grant 1965; Chambers 2006). The Cock Lane ghost is testament to the very practical and even empirical uses that can be made of a non-empirical or ideal ‘object’—a mere fiction—in eighteenth-century London.

As Peter Otto has suggested in *Multiplying Worlds: Romanticism, Modernity and the Emergence of Virtual Reality* (2011), the second half of the eighteenth century in Britain can be understood as a period in which new fictions and virtual worlds emerge across a range of cultural productions that are no longer based in the conventional parameters of the supernatural or the imagination. These fictions can be described as 'non-empirical idealities' that were seen to have tangible and empirical effects (Gaston 2010; 2013a 101–4; 2013b). What makes the Cock Ghost affair of 1761–1763 so compelling is that it was treated at the time as an event without an object. The ghost in Cock Lane was only heard and never seen, and this enabled it to be used both as an entertaining spectacle in the theatre and in the streets of London and to illustrate wider religious anxieties, pressing political conflicts and cultural confusions in the capital city. The challenge of understanding the significance of the ghost in Cock Lane is that it is a mobile, wayward event that inhabits the 'discursive' circulations of London in the early 1760s.¹

The Spectacles of London

The events in Cock Lane were, unsurprisingly, linked to the theatre in *The Cock Lane Uproar*, an anonymous print published in February 1762 (Grant 1965). The theatre was the great public entertainment of London and the home of the latest innovations in spectacle. *The Cock Lane Uproar* shows a crowd of spectators looking at Richard Parsons's eleven-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Parsons, as she is lying on a bed. This voyeuristic scene is justified because it has been reported in the newspapers that Elizabeth Parsons was the first to hear the 'Knocking Spirit' and to claim that this is the ghost of the allegedly murdered Fanny Lynes. In the print, the curtains around Elizabeth Parsons's bed look like the curtains on either side of a stage. This theatrical scene captures what would become a familiar trope in London throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century: the popular media spectacle of crime. This is not only a ghost story in Clerkenwell; it is also a murder mystery.

The sub-title of the print is: 'At Miss Fanny's New Theatre in Cock Lane'. The text beneath the picture adds, 'Such Persons of Distinction as have honoured us with their company at Cock Lane think the Performers excel those at Drury Lane'. This is a reference to the revival at the Drury Lane of Joseph Addison's *The Drummer*. I will come back to Addison's play in detail. In *The Drummer*, which also concerns a ghost, the audience is alerted at the outset that there is no ghostly drummer and is shown the mechanics of the human contrivance of the mysterious drumming. *The Cock-Lane Uproar* suggests that the murder mystery in Clerkenwell is an excellent entertainment with actors whose 'Performers excel those at Drury Lane'. The Parsons family may be amateurs, but they have sufficiently mastered the mechanics of theatrical spectacle to create a ghostly sound that appears to have no human origin. Unlike Addison's amusing play, the Parsons's claim that there is an actual ghost in Cock Lane also gives their performances a heightened verisimilitude. Nonetheless, the print is clear that the events in Cock Lane are only to be seen as a special kind of theatre.

David Garrick, the great actor and theatre manager of the day, reinforces this link between the unseen ghost and the theatrical and visual presentations that were inseparable from the popular cultural productions of London by including the Cock

Lane ghost in his own stage performance in the following month. Garrick's short interlude, *The Farmer's Return from London*, was first performed on 20 March 1762 and is primarily concerned with the coronation of George III and Royal Procession that had taken place in September 1761. Garrick plays the role of the country farmer who has just returned from London and describes to his family seeing the coronation, visiting the theatre and going to Cock Lane. The unseen ghost is treated on the same level as the unique London spectacles of a royal coronation and the latest plays in Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

This is of course Garrick's joke. There is no ghost and there is *nothing to see* for those who go to Cock Lane. Nonetheless, the problem of actually seeing the unique spectacles of London is also part of the general theme of the interlude. Sitting on the scaffolding lining the streets during the coronation procession, the spectators around the farmer make it look as if

There was street within street, and Houses on Houses!
I thought from above (when the Folk fill'd the Pleaces)
The streets pav'd with Heads, and Walls made of Faces!
(Garrick 1762: 11–12)

After this extraordinary visual scene in London, Garrick's farmer goes on to speak of the exceptional noises of the London theatres, which are 'like Bedlam, all roaring and rattling' (Garrick 1762: 12).

In contrast to these visual and auditory spectacles in the capital, when it comes to the events in Cock Lane, Garrick can in fact offer no descriptions and can do no more than play on an inversion of the traditional association of superstition with country credulity. The visit to Cock Lane, the farmer remarks, 'pleas'd me the moast / [as] Some Wise ones and I sat with a Ghoast' (Garrick 1762: 13). The farmer's wife then cries out:

Wife: A Ghoast (starting).
Farmer: Yes, a Ghoast!
Wife: I shall swoond away.
Farmer: Love! Odzooks!—thou'rt as bad as thy Betters above!
(Garrick 1762: 13)

As Garrick suggests, if there is in truth nothing to see in Cock Lane, the events there are notable primarily for the fashionable and educated elites of London travelling to Clerkenwell to hear the 'knocking ghost'. As the farmer observes, 'They may talk of the country, but, I say, in town / Their throats are much woider, to swallow things down' (Garrick 1762: 15). The unseen ghost *shows* the credulity of the London elites that are, in this context, truly no better than their country cousins. As Thomas Pynchon astutely observes in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), a novel set in the period, 'The Cock Lane Ghost is all the Rage. Mason makes a point of going out to see what he can see. He finds at the fam'd Parsons dwelling no Ghost, but is amaz'd at the Living who arrive whilst he's there' (Pynchon 1997: 183–4).

As *The Cock-Lane Uproar* had suggested, without anything to see in the Parsons's house, it is the visiting 'Persons of Distinction' that flock to Clerkenwell that become the most interesting spectacle for the crowds gathered in Cock Lane. It is curious Londoners watching other Londoners that are the true spectacle. In this sense, the unseen ghost acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting the spectacle of London: the wealthy, frivolous and fickle inhabitants who are always looking out for new entertainments. E. J. Clery has suggested that the ghost in Cock Lane is a particularly febrile London commodity (Clery 1995: 66, 70; Brewer 1995). One could add that as a recognised object that cannot be seen but still constitutes a spectacle, it has the distinction of reflecting the insubstantiality of the commodities of London. The ghost is a non-empirical ideality that focuses attention on powerful and fluid idealities that are neither traditional products of the supernatural or of the imagination. These idealities are products of London.

A One Hundred-Year-Old Ghost

The events in Clerkenwell not only set off a series of related spectacles in London but also reiterated that every eighteenth-century ghost—even an unseen ghost—is part of a quite specific cultural, religious and political history. Within ten days of the events in Cock Lane being reported in the newspapers in January 1762, Addison's 1715 comedy *The Drummer; or, The Haunted House* was revived and playing at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The ghost in Cock Lane had quite literally filled the principal theatres of London (Stone 1962: 882). *The Drummer* had been performed only occasionally in the decade before 1762.² Addison's play was itself inspired by Glanvill's accounts of 'The Drummer of Tedworth' in the early 1660s.³

Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680) can best be understood as a figure on the cusp of the conflict between reason and religion in the late seventeenth century. He was a member of the newly founded Royal Society and the author of *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661), which advocated new methods of scientific reasoning, and of the *Saducismus Triumphatus; or, Full and Plain Evidence concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681). *Saducismus Triumphatus* argues that if one denies the popular traditional belief in spirits, ghosts and witches, one risks giving way to a materialism (represented by Hobbes and Spinoza) that undermines the immaterial tenets of Christianity (Boone 1994; Mckeeon 1987: 83–9; Mintz 1962; Talmar 1981). 'The Drummer of Tedworth' tells the narrative of 'an idle Drummer' who had been 'a Souldier under Cromwel' and is driven out of Tedworth (Glanvill 1689: 328, 333). Some months later, a persistent 'Thumping and Drumming' was heard in a house in Tedworth and these noises continued for more than a year (Glanvill 1689: 322–25). The drummer was later arrested, 'tryed for a witch' and transported (Glanvill 1689: 333). Glanvill's narrative vividly describes the social tensions in England in the immediate aftermath of the Restoration.

This religious and political legacy is somewhat muted but still apparent some fifty years later when in 1715 Addison recasts the narrative of the 'Knocking Spirit' into a satirical attack on the Deists and a celebration of the new Hanoverian regime, which had come to power the previous year. In Addison's play, the drummer is no longer a soldier of the Commonwealth, but a loyal baronet fighting the new

Hanoverian monarch's wars. At the opening of the play, Sir George Truman has not returned from the war and there are rumours that he may have been killed. In a well-worn Homeric scene, Lady Truman is waiting at home beset by two competing suitors: Mr. Tinsel and Mr. Fantome. Knowing that Sir George was 'mightily pleased with the music of a drum', Mr. Fantome contrives to scare off his rival by pretending to be the drumming ghost of Sir George (Addison 1885: 159). In Addison's play it is clear that *there is no ghost*. Sir George himself will pretend to be a ghost to regain his domestic position and the only phantom is Mr. Fantome, who uses the drumming to scare off his rival Mr. Tinsel. The prologue informs the audience at the outset, there is 'An am'rous ghost, that's faithful, fond and true, / Made up of flesh and blood—as much as you' (Addison 1885: 157).

While Addison himself cautiously accepted the existence of spirits and angels within 'the Dictates of Reason and Religion', the narrative of *The Drummer* rejects any form of supernatural agency (Addison and Steele 1965 I: 54, 480). The revival in 1762 inherits this absence of ghosts or spectres. If anything, *The Drummer* celebrates this absence. As a knowing commentary on the ghost in Cock Lane, *The Drummer* reinforces that there is no ghost, no tangible or supernatural object, at stake. At the same time, it also demonstrates that this non-empirical ideality can have genuine empirical effects, as was apparent throughout London in 1762.

The restaging of Addison's play recycles a persistent motif of the eighteenth century: it is only the heterodox that are truly superstitious, since superstition has no access to authentic wonders or divine proofs. In Addison's play, only atheists believe that there are ghosts. In 1715 this works in the context of a clear refutation of the Deist movement. Mr. Tinsel is 'a Freethinker' and is a satirical portrait of the prominent Deist Matthew Tindal (Tindal 1706; see also Collins 1713, Evans 1710). Mr. Tinsel is an Epicurean, declaring that 'all about us is chance work' and can be reduced to the mere operations of 'motions, atoms and nature' (Addison 1885: 167–68). In Addison's play, there are no ghosts but there are Epicureans.

Having come to the Trumans' country residence from London, Mr. Tinsel mocks Lady Truman and her maid Abigail for their country superstitions:

Lady Truman: Though you give no credit to stories of apparitions, I hope you believe there are such things as spirits!

Mr. Tinsel: Simplicity!

Abigail: I fancy you don't believe women have souls, d'ye sir?

Mr. Tinsel: Foolish enough!

Lady Truman: I vow, Mr. Tinsel, I'm afraid malicious people will say I'm in love with an atheist.

Mr. Tinsel: Oh, my dear, that's an old-fashion'd word—I'm a Freethinker, child. (Addison: 1885: 167–68)

As his name suggests, Mr. Tinsel is all show and no substance. While Mr. Tinsel continues to ridicule superstition, Mr. Fantome begins to beat his drum and Mr. Tinsel's hypocrisy and naïveté are exposed:

Mr. Tinsel: I'll tell thee what, now, widow—I wou'd engage by the help of white sheet and penny-worth of link, in a dark night, to frighten you a whole country village out of their senses, and the vicar into the bargain [Drum beats.] hark! hark! what noise is that! Heaven defend us! this is more than fancy.

Lady Truman: It beats more terrible than ever.

Mr. Tinsel: 'Tis very dreadful! What a dog have I been to speak against my conscience, only to show my parts!

Lady Truman: It comes nearer and nearer. I wish you have not anger'd it by your foolish discourse. (Addison 1885: 198–99)

The revival of this play in 1762 at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden would have no doubt reaffirmed that there was no ghost in Clerkenwell and afforded a popular satirical attack on the credulous and the easily duped, especially if they were seen to be part of the wealthy, fashionable and intellectual elite. Taken out of its specific context as an attack on the Deists, the charge in Addison's play that only atheists believe that there are ghosts could be said to reinforce that the ghost in Cock Lane is not a phenomenon of belief as much as a widespread display of the lack of belief in the capital. This hundred-year narrative—from the disaffected drummer in 1661, to Addison's 1715 play to the events in London in 1762—is testament to the trans-historical consistency of a 'Knocking Spirit' that has no tangible presence and therefore can act as a flexible cipher for specific religious tensions in each historical period. At the same time, as we shall see, there were competing attempts in 1762–1763 to reduce the entire event to a non-religious material and empirical explanation, treat it as a part of the very real threat of Methodist and even Catholic belief and, finally, see it as a satire on the naïve superstitions of one of the great intellectual figures of the day.

A Small Piece of Wood

As Horace Walpole noted in a letter to Sir Horace Mann on 29 January 1762, the reported ghost in Cock Lane 'only Knocks & Scratches; [it] does not pretend to appear or speak' (Walpole 1956: VI: 3). Strictly speaking one cannot describe the Cock Lane ghost as a 'spectacle', as something that is shown or seen. The Cock Lane ghost claims to be, as 'The Drummer of Tedworth' and the ghost in *The Drummer*, a supernatural auditory event. This did not prevent a series of visual representations or tangible embodiments of the ghost. For some, this mobile spirit needed to be given a fixed materiality to neutralise its apparent threat to wider social, religious and political tensions. As we shall see, in his anxious criticism of contemporary religious and political events William Hogarth treated the ghost not only as a visible object but also as a tangible body that can be contained and even shamed in the public spaces of London.

What is more interesting is that this mere nothing, this auditory fiction in London, gives rise to a proliferation of tangible responses in newspaper articles, legal and theological investigations, theatrical shows, popular prints and pamphlets that cannot be gathered back into a narrative on a single, tangible object. The remarkable variety of London fictions produced by the ghost far exceeds its humble and rather

pathetic origins and ends in Cock Lane. The sheer scale and variety of responses to the events in Cock Lane suggests that an *event* in eighteenth-century London already needs to be understood as a series of ever-proliferating interactions and reactions that exceed the original parameters of its starting point. This is even more apparent when dealing with an event without a fixed object and a non-empirical ideality that has tangible effects across the capital.

With the exception of some notable Methodist sympathisers and an anonymous clergyman who published a timely *History of Apparitions* in 1762 arguing that anyone who treats 'spectres as fabulous [...] must either be an atheist or a deist', there were few who saw the events in Cock Lane at the time as anything but a clear example of 'superstition Detected and Exposed' (1762: 111; see also *Anti-Canidia*, 1762: 5). Nonetheless, the *Evening Post* noted, 'Great numbers of people continue assembling before the Clerk's house in Cock-lane' (*General Evening Post* 23–25 January, 1762: 2). In late January 1762, Samuel Johnson was asked by the Lord Mayor of London to join a committee gathered to investigate the events in Cock Lane. Johnson's notorious involvement in the affair was therefore prompted by an invitation from the public authorities. Sir Samuel Fludyer ordered that no 'Expence or Trouble' should be spared 'in detecting the Fraud' (Grant 1965: 483).⁴ From the outset, it was clear to the authorities and the investigating committee that the ghost in Cock Lane was a 'Fraud'. They did not take the murder charge seriously. The problem was to establish how the spectacle of the 'Knocking Spirit' in Elizabeth Parsons's bedroom had been created. What was the trick behind the curtains?

On 2 February 1762, the London newspapers printed an account of the committee's findings written by Johnson, the media contributing, as one would expect, to the exposure of a hoax they had reported with such avid enthusiasm.⁵ Johnson concluded there was no evidence of 'preternatural powers' and that the supposed ghost was an effect of human contrivance. Johnson argued that the ghost was simply an unaccountable auditory phenomenon. It should be treated, he writes, as a work of 'art' for 'counterfeiting particular noises' ('A Summary Account' 1762: 144–5). We might call it an installation these days. However, the fact remained that Johnson had been unable to discover the device that was creating the noises. It was only at the end of February 1762 that the mystery was apparently solved when, as Edmund Burke's *Annual Register* reported, a small piece of wood 'four inches broad, and six long' was found on Elizabeth Parsons as she lay in bed ('A Summary Account' 1762: 146; Bromwich 2014: 37). Hogarth later depicted this piece of wood as a mallet in his satirical print *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* in March 1762, which includes a depiction of the ghost in Cock Lane (Paulson 1971: II: 356).

Following the Lord Mayor's investigation and the public report written by Johnson, looking *through* this unexplained auditory event that claims a dubious supernatural agency one seemingly finds a banal material explanation: the 'Knocking Spirit' can be reduced to a small piece of wood. This demystifying narrative almost belongs to that of the growing interest in the natural sciences, which would steadily reduce the wonders and mysteries of the world to their natural, material conditions. From this perspective, the obscurity of this sound could be understood as a *natural* phenomenon. As Burke had suggested, a sublime intermitting sound arising from an obscure origin produces a pleasurable physiological response: 'some low, confused,

uncertain sounds, leave us in the same fearful anxiety concerning their causes, that no light, or an uncertain light does concerning the objects that surround us' (Burke 1990: 77; see also Kant 2000: 181).⁶ At the same time, this reduction of the cultural phenomena of the ghost in Cock Lane to a single material cause belies the range and mobility of the ghost to *speak for* a host of theatrical, religious, political and legal fictions.

The Mechanical Revelation

As Jeremy Collier had observed in his diatribe against the theatre at the start of the eighteenth century, the prologue was the moment when, 'properly speaking, the Actors quit the Stage, and remove from Fiction into Life' (Collier 1698: 8). In the 1762 revival of *The Drummer*, the actor Gentleman Smith's moment of removal 'from Fiction into Life' was the moment to speak directly to the audience about the fiction of Cock Lane. Smith says that they will 'bring a harmless Ghost upon the Stage', almost as if this 'harmless ghost' were being brought *in* to Covent Garden from the streets of London (Grant 1965: 84). The joke, of course, is that one cannot bring the ghost of Cock Lane 'upon the Stage', since it is an unseen auditory phenomenon. Simon During has suggested that when it comes to treating the ghost in Cock Lane as a performer on the London stage there is nothing to show and nothing to announce other than its desecularising fictionality (During 2002). I would argue that there is still a powerful religious sensibility at work here as well, as we will see in the varied responses of Hogarth and in the actions of Johnson when investigating the claim that Fanny Lynes had been murdered.

When Gentleman Smith goes on in his prologue to promise, 'We'll prove the story of our Phantom true, / And fairly bring him out to public view' (Grant 1965: 84), he is recycling the narrative of Addison's play. There is no ghost, only Mr. Fantome pretending to be a ghost and this is the only thing that can be brought 'out to public view'. In this context, when Smith goes on to speak of this 'credulous, believing age', it is clear that in a 'believing age' *only* the 'credulous' will doubt and believe that there is a ghost on the stage in Covent Garden and that there is a ghost in Cock Lane (Grant 1965: 84). *The Drummer* of 1762 reinforces the propriety of orthodox Anglican belief as stated at the start of the century.

In Addison's play, the contrivance of the 'strange noise' of drumming is quickly revealed:

Abigail: So now the coast is clear, I may venture to call out my drummer.—
But first let me shut the door lest we be surprised. Mr. Fantome, Mr.
Fantome! [He beats] Nay, nay, pray come out, the enemy's fled—I must speak
with you immediately—don't stay to beat a parley.

The back scene opens, and discovers Fantome with a drum. (Addison 1885: 162)

Since it already understands that there is no ghost, the theatrical representation here is not focused on showing or revealing the ghost in Cock Lane as an object. What matters is that the theatre is a stage in London for revealing the mechanisms *behind* the auditory phenomenon in the streets of Clerkenwell. With *The Drummer* playing in

both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the theatre acts almost as a counter-narrative, as a 'policing' action to contain any disorder in the streets of London.

For the audiences in the theatres in 1762, to follow the language of the *London Evening Post*, the 'mystery' which 'has lately so much engaged the public' is truly not about a ghost as a supernatural object but the artifice or contrivance that has made it possible (*General Evening Post* 26–28 January, 1762: 1). As in Addison's play, the theatricality of the event has nothing to do directly with the unseen ghost. It is the revelation of a mechanical device, of the materiality of the fiction that matters. This elusive materiality alone will resolve the wandering powers of the ghost in Cock Lane. In the play, this desire is entirely realised as the 'back scene opens' and 'discovers Fantome with a drum' (Addison 1885: 162). In this case, the opening of the back scene is a theatrical representation of the sublime small piece of wood that will be discovered as the single tangible object in this whole affair.

The critical difference between the back scene opening in the revival of Addison's play and the discovery of the small piece of wood in the Parsons's house in Cock Lane is that the piece of wood *shows nothing*: it is only a piece of wood and presents no visual spectacle to an audience. The play, however, shows everything. The scenes and machines, the engines of fictional spectacle, are used to confirm the news that the delightfully intangible is mundane and tangible. This need to turn the unseen fiction into a visual spectacle—into an object—that can be revealed, located and contained is also at the heart of Hogarth's very anxious and very real response to the events in Cock Lane.

Representing Idolatry

In March 1762, Hogarth published *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism. A MEDLEY*, a reworking of an earlier unpublished print from 1759, *Enthusiasm Delineated* (Paulson 1971: II: 298–9 *Enthusiasm*; 356 *Credulity*). Like Addison's 1715 play, the events in Cock Lane prompted a revision or recycling of pre-existing works and narratives to make sense of what was happening in London in 1762. Though Hogarth makes some significant alterations to the second print, it is important to emphasise that the essential framework for his response to the events in Cock Lane—as part of a medley of credulity, superstition and fanaticism—was shaped by his general criticisms of the influence of heterodox religious enthusiasm in British society in 1759. His concern was clearly that mere credulity could lead to the religious and political extremes of fanaticism. As we have seen, the Cock Lane ghost itself has quite a limited range. However, when it is placed as a reflective mirror within an existing network of political and theological fault-lines it takes on a striking resonance.

The 1759 print *Enthusiasm Delineated* depicts a congregation of different denominations enraptured by a sermon delivered in a meetinghouse that would have been recognised as George Whitefield's Methodist Tabernacle in London (Paulson 1971: II: 300). Whitefield was known for holding strong Calvinist views and had split away from John Wesley's more moderate Arminian form of Methodism. In the pews, Catholics are frantically eating small idols of Christ. In the pulpit, an Anglican clergyman is giving the sermon. However, the clergyman's wig has slipped from his head revealing a Catholic tonsure. The clergyman is also gazing rapturously at a

chandelier hanging from the roof on which is inscribed the words 'New Purgatory'. Not only is the clergyman a Catholic (or even a Jesuit) in disguise, but he is also wearing a harlequin's costume beneath his gown. Below the pulpit, there is a Methodist preacher reading from a text by Whitefield (Hrymaski 1998). Relying on fairly conventional anti-Catholic imagery, Hogarth sets the newly emerging Methodists as far away from the Anglican dispensation as possible: they are neither true Protestants nor even truly religious and can be compared only to the lowest form of European theatrical entertainment, the pantomime.

This comparison of Methodism to the mimicry and empty show of the pantomime not only links this religious denomination to the artifices of theatrical spectacle but also raises the problem for Hogarth of the role played by imitation, illustration and representation in protecting the purity of the Anglican Church. Hogarth had a specific target in mind in *Enthusiasm Delineated*. Thomas Secker, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, had been appointed in 1758 and was perceived by some to be unduly tolerant of Wesley's movement (Ingram 2007: 152–55; Gregory 2005: 173–74). In a number of letters from 1762, Horace Walpole notes with contempt that Archbishop Secker has sanctioned Anglican clergy 'to give their benediction' to the ghost in Cock Lane (Walpole 1956: VI: 3). Walpole mockingly suggests that the 'farce' being 'played every night' in Cock Lane will soon be performed 'in the great hall at Lambeth', the Bishop's Palace (Walpole 1941: II: 6). As Ronald Paulson points out, Secker was also a supporter of William Pitt and he appears in Hogarth's unpublished *The Times, Plate 2*, which attacks Pitt's pro-war policy during the Seven Years War (1756–1763) (Paulson 1993: 262, 393). It was probably the directness of his association of the head of the Anglican Church with Methodism and, even more seriously, with Catholicism that prevented Hogarth from publishing both of these prints.

In his revised print from 1762, *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism. A MEDLEY*, Hogarth has recast the congregation as Methodists and a number of them are depicted as avidly grasping an effigy of a female figure in a white shroud holding a candle in her right hand. This is most likely a *literal* representation of the ghost of Fanny Lynes and very much in the spirit of the 1759 print in which Hogarth attacked the idolatry of 'literal and low conceptions of sacred beings' (Paulson 1971: II: 300). In criticising a certain literalisation in religious practice, one can also say that Hogarth himself turns the ghost of Cock Lane into a literal object. He has created an idol to attack idolatry.

In *Enthusiasm Delineated*, there had been a large upright thermometer standing to the right of the pulpit, gauging degrees of enthusiasm and the passions, such as 'madness', 'extacy' and 'raving'. In *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism*, the thermometer is now crowned by the small stage-like scene of Elizabeth Parson's bedroom in the house in Cock Lane. Above this scene stands the Drummer of Tedworth, linking not only Addison's revived play but also Glanvill's original narrative to the events in Cock Lane: Hogarth recognises that this fictional ghost has a history. With Hogarth, we have turned to the defence of the Anglican Church as the Established Church, and it is hardly surprising in this context that he dispenses with the fiction of the unseen ghost and treats the 'Knocking Spirit' as a visible form of idolatry and the representation of what cannot and should not be represented.⁷

Ronald Paulson has suggested that this charge of idolatry also links *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* to *The Times, Plate 1*, published in September 1762 (Paulson 1971: II, 358-9; Paulson 1979: 30). In both prints there is a fanatical London mob being manipulated and deceived by hidden interests. The congregation that was dazzled by the ghost of Cock Lane as a religious idol have now become the city officials of London that are blinded by the idol of Pitt and the commercial interests behind him that want to continue the long war with France (Paulson 1971: II, 360). After Pitt himself, for Hogarth the most divisive idol of early 1760s is John Wilkes. In *The Times, Plate 1*, Wilkes and his co-editor of the *North Briton*, Charles Churchill, are seen leading the opposition against Lord Bute and the King's favoured policy of bringing the war to an end.

Never published, *The Times, Plate 2* represents Hogarth's response to the eventual vote for peace in December 1762 and the arrest of Wilkes in April 1763 for the defamation of the King in *North Briton* no. 45 (Rudé 1962; Brewer 1976; Schweizer 1988; Carrette 1990; Thomas 1996). These important political events in the early reign of George III are linked directly by Hogarth to the Cock Lane ghost. In an apparently open and orderly London public space, free of the social disorder and religious confusions of *Credulity* and *The Times, Plate 1*, Hogarth places John Wilkes and the idol of the Cock Lane ghost next to each other in the public pillory (Paulson 1971: II, 380-2; West 1999). As in *Credulity*, the ghost holds a mallet in her right hand and a candle in her left hand. Hogarth also puts Archbishop Secker in the background of the scene behind the Cock Lane ghost. The political message is clear: as Wilkes stands behind the idolatry of Pitt, Secker stands behind the idolatry of Cock Lane. The ghost of Cock Lane has become a portrait of the age. Hogarth represents the ghost, he gives it a visible identity, but he also still treats it as an elaborate fiction or a piece of religious and political theatre. The tangible, material object here is not the ghost but the corrupt and unreliable leadership of the Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

London is the Devil's Drawing Room

While Hogarth went out of his way to represent the ghost as part of a traditional form of social manipulation, Charles Churchill's vituperative poem 'The Ghost', published from March 1762 to November 1763, celebrates the transparency of the ghost in Cock Lane. Churchill had co-edited the *North Briton* with Wilkes, the title referring to Scotland and George III's prime minister, the Scottish Lord Bute. For Churchill, there was never a ghost in Cock Lane and since the ghost is only a fiction, it has a special mobility and it lends itself to another form of representation. The 'ghost' is in this case not a mirror as much as a window or transparent frame that one looks through to see the reality of a series of vested London political interests, social fictions and ingrained hypocrisies at work.

Churchill was a hired pen of Wilkes. His diatribe in 'The Ghost' against Wilkes's enemies and his antipathy to the Scots in the English government employs the familiar strategy of accusing his opponents of private interests and hidden agendas. At the same time, by choosing the title 'The Ghost', Churchill uses the entire affair of the ghost in Cock Lane as a perspective or vantage point from which to see all the political

machinations of the day. The invisibility of the ghost operates here as a kind of heightened and acute vision. Seeing *through* the events in Cock Lane, one can see that there is 'NO GOD but INTEREST alone' (Churchill 1956: 119). The ghost shows us that there are only the deceivers and the deceived, the manipulators and the dupes in this society.

Tobias Smollett, a vociferous defender of Lord Bute and George III, had already painted a vivid portrait of 'the knavery of the world' in *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) (Smollett 1981: 47). As his friend Hugh Strap remarks to Roderick, 'London is the devil's drawing room' (Smollett 1981: 95). What distinguishes Churchill's invective is that these knaveries are founded on the recognition that culture functions as a form of social and political manipulation: there are only those who employ fictions and those who succumb to these fictions. In this sense, Burke is not that far removed from Churchill when he compares revolutionary France to a 'vast, tremendous, unformed spectre' in his 'First Letter on a Regicide Peace' (1796) (Burke 1991: 190–91). According to Churchill, looking through the Cock Lane ghost as one might look through the lens of a telescope, we can see the true magnitude of the duplicity and credulity in contemporary society. In this sense, the unseen ghost in Cock Lane has the transparency and mobility to serve—at the same time—Hogarth's critique of Wilkes in *The Times, Plate 2* and Churchill's defence of Wilkes in 'The Ghost'.

The Law and the Press

One can also contrast Churchill's stark analysis of mid eighteenth-century society to the passionate response of Oliver Goldsmith to the events in Cock Lane. Like Churchill, he treats the ghost as a transparent window that highlights the fictional nature of aspects of his society, but unlike Churchill he also uses the ghost to draw a clear distinction between what he sees as the dangerous fictional narratives of the London press and the necessary respect for the law that can and should be free of all fictions.

In the *Life of Johnson* (1791), Boswell records a conversation between Johnson and Goldsmith in 1772 in which Goldsmith remarks that his brother the Reverend Mr. Goldsmith claims that he had seen a ghost (Boswell 1980: 486). Whether or not Goldsmith, who was born in Ireland but raised an Anglican, shared his brother's confidence in the supernatural world, there is no indication in *The Mystery Revealed*, his 1762 pamphlet on the Cock Lane Ghost, that he believes in the existence of ghosts as spirits or souls of the dead. On the contrary, he argues that when it is obvious that there is no supernatural agency at work and one is dealing only with the fictitious claims to the supernatural, the motives and duties of public figures and bodies must be free of any confusion (Goldsmith 1966: IV: 421; Friend 1998). For Goldsmith, the transparency of the public domain in London itself is at stake. Looking *through* the ghost in Cock Lane, one must find solid public bodies and reliable civic structures.

Goldsmith is primarily concerned with the public accusation of William Kent as the murderer of Fanny Lynes. According to the Parsons, she has returned as a ghost to haunt the Parsons's house until her death is avenged. For Goldsmith, this is a direct threat to due legal process. William Kent has been 'branded without an accuser'

(Goldsmith 1966: IV: 432, 422). 'And who is the accuser?' the outraged Goldsmith asks, 'Why a ghost! The reader laughs; yet, ridiculous as the witness is, groundless as the accusation, it has served to make one man completely unhappy' (Goldsmith 1966: IV: 430). In this case, the intangibility of the ghost dramatically demonstrates the force of non-empirical idealities having tangible effects. The law ultimately reasserted its authority in July 1762 when Kent was cleared of any wrongdoing and Richard Parsons was sentenced to two years imprisonment (Grant 1965: 113–14).

Goldsmith also attacks the London press for their role in spreading the ungrounded accusations against William Kent. As Barbara Benedict (2001) has pointed out, by 1762 there was already a long tradition of the British media inflaming public interest in tricks, magic shows, hoaxes and sensational crimes with apparent supernatural origins. With his name 'every where public', thanks to the 'newspapers', Goldsmith observes, William Kent has been 'branded without an accuser' and not been given 'in law a power of redress' (Goldsmith 1966: 432, 422). Goldsmith's pamphlet is not a call for restrictions on the press as much as demand for the defamation of William Kent to be treated as a legal issue. Once again, it is the solid tangibility of the legal institutions that can counteract the association of the free-floating gossip of London and the insubstantial circulations of the ghost in Cock Lane. William Kent was eventually awarded damages by the court (Grant 1965: 113). Nonetheless, Goldsmith's pamphlet also suggests that the true power of the rapid, mobile fictions of London is found not in the theatres but in the plethora of words and newspaper that spreads around the capital each day.⁸

Visible Targets

Finally, the most striking legacy of the events in Cock Lane in 1762 is the charge that Samuel Johnson was taken in by the hoax (Bate 1978: 352–3). In attempting to establish beyond doubt that the 'supposed spirit' had no supernatural agency of any kind, Johnson had gone at night to the Clerkenwell vault and visited the coffin of Fanny Lynes—he may have even tapped on the coffin—to verify that there was no connection between her death and the auditory sounds heard in Cock Lane. Johnson's actions were interpreted at the time as evidence not of his faith, but of his credulity. In his published report, he simply records that the 'spirit was very solemnly required to manifest its existence' in the Parsons's bedroom and also 'solemnly required to perform its promise' in the vault at Clerkenwell (Johnson 1762: 145).

According to Boswell, as one might expect of an orthodox Anglican, Johnson was open to the possible existence of spirits. 'This is', he records Johnson saying, 'a question which, after five thousand years, is yet undecided' (Boswell 1980: 951). Boswell emphasises that Johnson's attitude towards the supernatural was cautious and judicial. The question of the existence of spirits could only be decided by empirical proofs that had an authority beyond the delusions and errors of the imagination. Boswell notes Johnson saying in 1763, the year after the events in Cock Lane, 'sir, I make a distinction between what a man may experience by the mere strength of his imagination, and what imagination cannot possibly produce' (Boswell 1980: 287; see also Johnson 1990: 116). Johnson's nocturnal visit to the vault at Clerkenwell can be taken as an understandable and quixotic attempt to dispel what he had called in *The*

Rambler (1750–1752) the ‘effervescence of an agitated fancy’ (Johnson 1969: I: 236).⁹ If anything, perhaps Johnson erred by taking the events in Cock Lane as a possible example not of the supernatural but of the imagination. While there were obvious religious resonances connected with the ghost by Hogarth and others, one could say that Johnson fails to recognise that the ghost in Cock Lane was not simply a traditional religious object or a customary product of the imagination; it was also a spectacle of London.

Ever watchful for victims of Methodist influence and religious credulity, Horace Walpole would later insist in his memoirs that ‘Johnson was in the number of the deluded’ (Walpole 1845: I: 148). Spreading his invective against those who opposed Wilkes and Pitt, Churchill also had gladly represented Johnson at the time as a dupe of the fictions of superstition in ‘The Ghost’ (Churchill 1956: 490–91). Johnson is among the deceived, Churchill writes, because he goes to ‘Fanny [...] to find her false, or find her true’—a needless undertaking when one is dealing with yet another example of the politicised fictions of society (Churchill 1956: 88; Boswell 1980: 288).

More interestingly, Johnson would be remembered well into the nineteenth century for having believed in this blatant instance of an eighteenth-century social fiction. In *Sartor Resartus* (1836) Carlyle observes, ‘Again, could any thing be more miraculous than an actual authentic Ghost? The English Johnson longed, all his life, to see one; but could not, though he went to Cock Lane, and thence to the church-vaults, and tapped on coffins. Foolish Doctor!’ (Carlyle 1987: 200). At the end of the nineteenth century, in *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (1894) Andrew Lang also describes Johnson as the ‘last of the Mohicans of Superstition’ (Lang 1894: 136). One might say that he was the last of the Mohicans not of superstition, but of relying on the traditional alternative between supernatural truths and the delusions of the imagination. As Peter Otto has persuasively shown in *Multiplying Worlds*, the later Romantic imagination was intertwined with an acute sense of the cultural fictions and virtual realities of the period that were not founded merely in the imagination. The Cock Lane ghost affair in London in 1762–1763 can be taken as an early instance of the emergence of the powerful non-empirical idealities that will appear in the panorama, the panopticon and the phantasmagoria (Otto 2011: 19–44, 45–63, 107–128).

One could also argue that the later treatment of Johnson fills the void for the lack of a tangible and visible object at the centre of the narrative of the Cock Lane ghost. As Helen Deutsch has pointed out, the distinctive corporeality of Samuel Johnson was already a notable aspect of his presence in the eighteenth century and has become an integral part of his monumental biography (Deutsch 2005: 94). In a letter from 1751, Lord Chesterfield had described a man of ‘deep learning and superior parts’ whose physical appearance ‘seems made to disgrace or ridicule the common structure of the human body’ (Chesterfield 1992: 220). Boswell was convinced that this was a description of Johnson, who was known for his vast bulk, nervous ticks and abrupt gestures (Boswell 1980: 188–89).

When he first meets Johnson in 1763, Boswell describes him in his diary as, ‘a man of most dreadful appearance. He is a very big man, is troubled with sore eyes, the palsy, and the king’s evil. He is very slovenly in his dress and speak with a most

uncouth voice' (Boswell 2004: 260). Far from having an unseen, mute spirit, which only responds with knocking sounds and ends up being no more than a small piece of wood, one is given the loquacious, multitudinous and relentlessly visible target of the corpus of Dictionary Johnson.¹⁰ What Johnson couldn't see was that the ghost was not in the vault in Clerkenwell. It was already everywhere and nowhere in London—a London that was itself becoming a 'vast, tremendous, unformed spectre'.

Notes

1. Discursive is used here in the sense that Allison gives it his work on Kant, as epistemological and non-ontological gesture (Allison 2004).
2. It had last been performed at Covent Garden on 8 December 1752 and at Drury Lane on 4 February 1758 (Stone 1962: 914).
3. Glanvill modified his account of the Drummer of Tedworth throughout the 1660s and 1670s. The final version appears in the 1689 edition of *Saducismus Triumphatus* (Glanvill 1689: 321–38).
4. The Lord Mayor may have been also concerned about the events in Cock Lane encouraging a series of copycat spectres in London. See 'A Present to the Renowned Society of Ghostmongers' (1762: 82–4).
5. Johnson's anonymous account was reprinted in a number of publications: Johnson 1762: 81; Goldsmith 1966: IV: 434; 'A Summary Account' 1762: 114–45. It was identified as Johnson's nearly thirty years later in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (Boswell 1980: 928).
6. Jane Elizabeth Lewis has recently addressed this question of the exclusively auditory nature of the unseen ghost in Cock Lane. She focuses on its role in raising 'new specters of literary authority' that mock and challenge 'the permanence of the written sign' (Lewis 2007: 249, 254, 257–58, 266).
7. The *General Evening Post* had reminded its readers in January of the 'imposture of the Boy of Bilson' (26–28 January, 1762: 1). See also Todd 1995: 1–139.
8. One could compare this to Burke's later attack in *Reflections on the Revolution* on the paper currency used by the revolutionaries in France as yet another example of the ungrounded fictions that they instituted for their new society (Burke 1968: 224, 357).
9. Johnson is preoccupied in *The Rambler* with the unreliability of the imagination: I, 9 (no. 2); I: 318–19 (no. 60). His solutions emphasise the authority of reason, rational reflection and the stabilizing influence of society (Johnson 1969: I: 42–6 (no. 8); I: 156–7 (no. 28); II: 38 (no. 151)). Johnson's comments on the proper role of the imagination in religion are also of interest here (Johnson 1992: II: 132–4). See also Havens 1943; Alkon 1967; Damrosch 1989.
10. Johnson was very attentive to the problem of different forms of delusion, whether religious or theatrical. In his preface to his edition of Shakespeare, published three years after the events in Cock Lane, he would write: 'It is false that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramattick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited. [...] Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation; if the spectator can once be persuaded [...] he is in a state of elevation above the reach of reason, or of truth' (Johnson 1987: 24).

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