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Speaking of Seeing Ghosts: Visions of the Supernatural in the Tales of Catherine Crowe

Abstract: In 1848 Catherine Crowe's ground-breaking book *The Night Side of Nature* was published in England. In a fragmented and disjointed narrative, Crowe looks at ghosts, the spectral and the weird through stories, anecdotes and reported personal experience. Crowe gleaned stories from people she met and who wrote to her with their own ghost tales and she believed that these vocalised experiences were worthy of serious attention. *The Night Side of Nature* is a folklore narrative, or more specifically a collection of folk tales. Traditionally ghost stories were most often told tales and much of what Crowe presents is deeply rooted in oral traditions and consists of hearsay and gossip. During Victorian times and until very recently, orality, folklore and gossip were all denigrated and feminised forms of story-telling and communication. Crowe's "evidence" of ghosts is subjective; gleaned from people's talk about ghosts and their experiences of ghosts manifested through the senses – sight, sound and bodily reactions to grief and/or terror. The type of tales she published pointed the way to the manifested ghost sightings and experiences that the Spiritualist movement was founded upon. This movement began in America in 1848 with the Fox sisters but Spiritualism did not reach England until 1849, the year after Crowe's book was published. Uninfluenced by the phenomenon that Spiritualism was to become, Crowe's work shows independence of thought and a clear feeling for the spiritual needs of her time. This paper argues that Crowe is an important but often overlooked figure who greatly influenced the way the Victorians imagined the spectral. Immersed in oral traditions and a part of what Birchall calls "unruly orality" (101), *The Night Side of Nature* was a disruptive, subversive and feminine text that gave voice to the start of the Spiritualist generation in England.

Can we believe what we see? This must be the most pressing question posed by ghost stories as well as those who have had experiences of "seeing ghosts". In fictional tales, with few exceptions, the answer tends to be yes, the ghost-seer can believe what he or she sees. However, there are different kinds of ghost stories and the ones examined in this essay are not the usual, fictional tales, rather they consist of reports, rumours and testimonies of *real* ghost sightings and experiences of the paranormal.

In 1854 a sixty-four year old woman was found wandering the streets of Edinburgh naked, carrying a handkerchief in one hand and a card case in the other believing that she was invisible. This woman was the fêted author and compiler of

“real” ghost stories, Catherine Crowe. The story was widely reported and Charles Dickens (who had been friendly with her) wrote to Emile de la Rue:

There is a certain Mrs. Crowe, usually resident in Edinburgh, who wrote a book called the *Night Side of Nature*, and rather a clever story called *Susan Hopley*. She was a Medium and an Ass, and I don't know what else. The other day she was discovered walking down her own street in Edinburgh, not only stark mad but stark naked too. ... She is now under restraint of course. (qtd. in Storey, Tillotson and Easson, 288)

Crowe was not, as Dickens reported in another letter, “hopelessly insane” (285) and she recovered but she never regained her former position whereby she “was once as famous as Dickens or Thackeray” (Wilson v). The root of this erstwhile fame was a book she wrote in 1848, *The Night Side of Nature: of Ghosts and Ghost Seers*. This book was published in January just before the advent of Spiritualism which is agreed to have begun with the Fox sisters hearing table rapping and communing with spirits in America in March. *The Night Side* proved to be a phenomenally popular book and it was very well known in the Victorian era. Before the aforementioned “problem”, Dickens reviewed it in *The Literary Examiner* and called it, “one of the most extraordinary collections of ‘Ghost Stories’ that has ever been published”, declaring that Crowe “can never be read without pleasure and profit, and can never write otherwise than sensibly and well” (1848 1). Crowe’s intention with the book was to gather evidence which could provide authentic accounts of ghost seeing and perhaps pave the way to the discovery of the truth of the supernatural. Accordingly she gathered a plethora of tales ranging from stories told directly to her, reports of experiences of the supernatural told to others, letters, newspaper reports, legends and contemporary myths. She also solicited people to write in to her with their own ghost tales and in very many places she vouches for the credibility of the ghost-seer or the source of the tales.

The Night Side of Nature is a peculiar book which consists of lots of disjointed snippets all mish-mashed together. It is not an easy read but in its disjointedness it provides a snapshot or montage of ghost seeing and experiences. Despite the popularity of *The Night Side of Nature* with the general public, Crowe herself came in for some quite unpleasant comments from critics. As late as 1930 G. T. Clapton wrote that:

The chapters are very loosely constructed, the instances not rigorously classed or criticised, the repetitions frequent and the whole is written in a deplorable style, packed with solecisms and even faults of spelling. Her narrative runs on interminably with a careless inconsequence betraying the worst aspects of feminine laxity and vagueness. (290)

Despite this “laxity”, for more modern scholars her work certainly has merit and interest. Gillian Bennett, writing in the introduction to Folklore Society edition of *The Night Side of Nature*, makes the claim that:

Mrs. Crowe’s lack of system is actually a bonus. Because everything is jumbled together – legends, personal experience, *dites* and rumours – each validates the other to present a picture of the sorts of things that were reported, transmitted and thought believable at one particular point in time. (2000, 13)

Crowe’s book contains a wide variety of different types of phenomena. She has chapters on “Wraiths”, “Warnings”, “Apparitions”, dreams, trances, poltergeists and presentiments as well as traditional ghost sightings. Crowe gathered all the reports and tales in the certainty that ghosts and all the supernatural phenomena reported on were real.

Crowe was also certain that experiences of the paranormal or the supernatural were more frequent than most people thought and she states:

The number of stories on record, which seem to support the view I have suggested is, I fancy, little suspected by people in general; and still less is it imagined that similar occurrences are yet frequently taking place. ... I do not mean to suggest that all my acquaintance are ghost-seers, or that these things happen every day; but the amount of what I do mean, is this; ... that besides the numerous instances of such phenomena alluded to in history, which have been treated as fables by those who profess to believe the rest of the narratives, though the whole rests on the same foundation, that is, tradition and hearsay; besides these, there exists in one form or another, hundreds and hundreds of recorded cases in all countries, and in all languages, exhibiting that degree of similarity which mark them as belonging to a class of facts. (142)

Crowe makes an interesting comment here about history. Her point is that, whilst some aspects of historical narrative are accepted as factual and believable, those parts of the narrative that document supernatural occurrences and events are not. However, she argues that *all* historical narrative is based on ‘tradition and hearsay’ as are the accounts in *The Night Side of Nature*. And throughout history, as well as in her own book, the documented experiences that people have had of the supernatural are surprisingly numerous and consistent throughout the centuries.

Diana Basham argues that ‘the ghost story provided for many writers in the second half of the century its own peculiar route into feminism’ (157), and Crowe’s ghost tales certainly empowered her, gave her a voice and gained her a hearing. Alex Owen and Vanessa Dickerson, among others, have pointed to Victorian ghost stories and the Spiritualist movement as providing space for women and allowing celebrations of femininity (Owen 1989; Dickerson 1996). However Crowe was writing *before* Spiritualism had come into being, before the rise of the female

medium and before the golden age of the ghost story. *The Night Side of Nature* was certainly a timely book that captured the imagination of the public and helped pave the way for the rapid rise of Spiritualism when it was introduced to Britain a few years later.

Mundane Ghost Sightings

Crowe's ghost tales are often narrated by people in everyday settings. They detail people's *experience* of seeing ghosts. These sightings can happen just as easily in the day as at night and very often do not carry any fear or dread: the experiences themselves seem, at the time, commonplace. The following extract is from the chapter in *The Night Side of Nature* entitled 'Wraiths':

Mr C F and some young ladies, not long ago, were standing together looking in at a shop window in Brighton – when he suddenly darted across the way, and they saw him hurrying along the street, apparently in pursuit of somebody. After waiting a while, as he did not return, they went home without him; and, when he was come, they of course arraigned him for his want of gallantry.

'I beg your pardon,' said he, 'but I saw an acquaintance of mine that owes me money, and I wanted to get hold of him.' [...]

No more was thought of the matter; but, by the next morning's post, Mr C F received a letter enclosing a draft from the father of the young man he had seen, saying that his son had just expired, and one of his last requests had been that he would pay Mr C F the money that he owed him.

Two young ladies, staying at the Queen's Ferry, arose one morning, early to bathe; as they descended the stairs, they each exclaimed, 'There's my uncle!' They had seen him standing by the clock. He died at that time.

Very lately, a gentleman living in Edinburgh, while sitting with his wife, suddenly arose from his seat and advanced towards the door with his hand extended, as if about to welcome a visitor. On his wife's enquiring what he was about, he answered that he had seen so-and-so enter the room. She had seen nobody. A day or two afterwards, the post brought a letter announcing the death of the person seen.' (116–7)

This is a mere fraction of the type of tales that make up *The Night Side of Nature*. These stories are contemporary and do not carry any great shocks or surprises; they are mundane. The narrative style is matter of fact and straight-forward, albeit disjointed. There is no drama in the telling, none of the ghost-seers are afraid and the sightings are reported as absolute fact with no questioning of their veracity. These tales are included by Crowe, not for sensational effect, but as proof of the *usualness* of sightings like these. The stories are subjective, remembered tales and often have more in common with the traditions of oral ghost-telling than with the more usual Victorian literary ghost stories. The stories are not literary narratives

but *told* tales and whilst there are a few ghost stories of the more traditional type in *The Night Side of Nature* there is mixing of genres and the tales themselves, coming as they do from so many different sources, are presented in many different forms.

In a section of *The Night Side of Nature* entitled “Haunted Houses” Crowe reproduces a series of letters about a house that is haunted. These letters provide a seemingly authentic account of an experience of ghost-seeing forming a document that attests to the witnessing of the phenomenon. This story and the characters involved are included in an anthology compiled by Peter Ackroyd in 2010, but the source of the tale is not attributed to Crowe (204). This suggests that it was a ‘known’ tale, one spoken about and which had perhaps passed into contemporary legend. This is what Crowe tells us about her own source:

The proprietor of the house, who lives in it, declines to make public the particulars of the disturbance to which he has been subjected, and it must be understood that the account of the visit we are about to lay before our readers is derived from a friend to who Dr Drury presented a copy of his correspondence on the subject. (244)

Here we have several frames for the documents, but they are still presented by Crowe as authenticated evidence. The scenario laid out in the correspondence is one familiar to all who read literary ghost stories. Dr Edward Drury, a dis-believer and sceptic, asks leave of the owner of a reputedly haunted house, to take a companion and spend a night there. Having been granted permission they examine the house and, satisfied it is empty apart from themselves, they begin to sit up and take watch. They hear noises but experience nothing much more and Dr Drury decides to go to bed. He notes in one of his letters what happens next:

I took out my watch to ascertain the time, and found that it wanted ten minutes to one. In taking my eyes from my watch, they became riveted upon a closet-door, which I distinctly saw open, and saw also the figure of a female attired in greyish garments, with the head inclining downwards, and one hand pressed upon the chest as if in pain, and the other, viz., the right hand extended towards the floor, with the index finger pointing downwards. It advanced with an apparently cautious step across the floor towards me; immediately as it approached my friend who was slumbering, its right hand was extended towards him. I then rushed at it, giving, as Mr Proctor states, a most awful yell; but instead of grasping it I fell upon my friend, and I recollected nothing distinctly for nearly three hours afterwards. I have since learned that I was carried downstairs in an agony of fear and terror. (247–8)

The level of detail given here is important to the writer who bears witness to his experience of seeing the ghost. Drury includes as much detail as he can – making sure we know which is the ghost’s right hand and left hand, which finger points downwards and the exact stance of the ghost. His eye goes from the objective, verifiable technology and accuracy of his watch to the apparition that appears in

front of him and the suggestion is that both are subjected to the same objective gaze. That it is Mr Proctor who states that Drury gave a terrible cry gives another layer of credibility from a second witness and the fact that the whole is written out in a letter carries connotations of authenticity and truth and points towards the possibility of verification. Indeed, the letter ends with the following statement: "I hereby certify that the above account is strictly true and correct in every respect" (248). This reads more as a legal eye witness account than an actual ghost story. This acknowledgment of the truth of the existence of the supernatural has been drawn out of Drury with reluctance. In one of his letters after the event he writes: "I am persuaded that no one went to your house at any time more *disbelieving in respect to seeing anything peculiar*; and now no one can be more satisfied than myself" (246 emphasis in the original). Edward Drury has *seen* something and this has convinced him of the reality of the supernatural. The letters that Crowe includes persuade the reader also that they are witnessing something that is a true account: Edward Drury has seen a ghost.

Seeing and Power

It is not just that ghosts are seen, most ghosts *need* to be seen. Ghosts themselves are a phenomenological experience: a *sensory* experience. These most un-fleshly of beings can only be perceived *by* the flesh, be it merely a shrinking, trembling feeling, an intuitive sense that something is there, or an actual vision. Ghosts do not exist unless they are perceived by a living person and the most effective/archetypal way of sensing ghosts is through sight; by *seeing* them. There are of course paradoxes here, not least the idea that ghosts come from the realm of the *unseen*; the Otherworld, the Beyond, from *elsewhere*. Ghosts re-turn from the place of the unseen and the unknown. However the very *raison-d'être* for a ghost must be to be sensed and ultimately to be *seen*. Ethereal, delicate or see-through as the ghost may be, it is the seeing, the *perceiving* of the phenomena that matters.

On the first page of *The Victorian Eye*, Chris Otter says "*Who* could see *what*, *whom*, *when*, and *how* was, and remains an integral dimension of the everyday operation and experience of power" (2008 1, emphasis in the original). In the example of ghost seeing just given in the letters, it is the middle class, respectable male figure who narrates his experience and in an authoritative epistolary form and Dr Drury himself claims objective vision in relation to the ghost he saw. Yet Crowe claims that it is often Other people who see ghosts. She states that this type of receptive seeing is "more frequently developed in women than in men" (176) and she goes on to argue that "it is usually the humble, the simple and the child-like, the solitary, the recluse, nay, the ignorant, who exhibit traces of these occult

faculties” (201). Yet it is often these people who are themselves over-looked. Alex Owen, when talking about Victorian spiritualism says:

Spiritualism as a movement ... privileged women and took them seriously Spiritualist culture held possibilities for attention, opportunity and status denied elsewhere. In certain circumstances it could also provide a means of circumventing rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms. ... Spiritualism had the potential, not always consciously realised, for subversion. (1989 4)

When Spiritualism arrived in Britain Crowe became a strong advocate of the movement. Her own work, published earlier than Spiritualism, also always held radical potential. Her view of who can and cannot see clearly is progressive. She argues that although for all of us vision is limited, “spiritual seeing” is most often possible when we are open, receptive and intuitively tuned (26). Crowe advocates a *different* way of seeing which is less sure and more open. And it is this openness that might enable us to see what was, before, unseen.

Thomas Fick says that in the nineteenth century “[m]ost women and many feminists ... accepted a fundamental distinction between men and women, assigning women the higher – that is, more spiritual – station” (83). This is certainly the case with Crowe. Alex Owen has argued, in relation to Spiritualism, that this is problematic as women’s “essence” was believed to be different, more passive and intuitive than a man’s (1989). However, she also acknowledges a “democratic impulse” which led to the belief that “any individual, male or female, rich or poor, could become the conduit for a dialogue with the spirits” (5). Crowe believed spirit-seeing to be empowering and enlightening. She says in order to see a ghost “there must be ... the “opening of the eye”, which may perhaps signify the seeing of the spirit without the aid of the bodily organ” (180). It is not the body of the seer that is important, it is the opening of perception as well as a willingness to believe.

Crowe is always critical of those who refuse to countenance the possibility of ghosts and other supernatural phenomenon. She says that many people who see apparitions believe them to be an illusion, however she goes on to state: “[b]elieving the apparition to be an illusion *because* they cannot bring themselves to believe in ghosts, simply amounts to saying “I don’t believe, because I don’t believe,” and is an argument of no effect” (142). The idea that one would refuse to believe in what one has perceived with one’s own eyes seems somewhat strange. However Kate Flint claims that “[t]he Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability – or otherwise – of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw” (2000 1). Interpretation of a seeming ghost-sighting is certainly a difficulty. Crowe notes

another phenomenon whereby a person is perceived to be in two places at once. She documents the case of Mr H:

Mr H was one day walking along the street, apparently in perfect health, when he saw, or supposed he saw, his acquaintance, Mr C, walking before him. He called to him aloud, but he did not seem to hear him, and continued moving on. Mr H then quickened his pace for the purpose of overtaking him, but the other increased his [...] and proceeded at such a rate that Mr H found it impossible to make up to him. This continued for some time, till, on Mr C's reaching a gate, he opened it and passed in, slamming it violently in Mr H's face. Confounded at such treatment from a friend, the latter instantly opened the gate, and looked down the long lane into which it led, where, to his astonishment, no one was to be seen. Determined to unravel the mystery, he then went to Mr C's house, and his surprise was great to hear that he was confined to his bed, and had been so for several days. (125)

Crowe gives several instances of this “doubling” whereby what appears to be the body of a person is seen by another when their actual body is elsewhere. She says:

These appearances seem to have taken place when the corporeal condition of the person seen elsewhere, permits us to conceive the possibility of the spirit's having withdrawn from the body; but the question then naturally arises, what is it that was seen; and I confess, that of all the difficulties that surround the subject I have undertaken to treat of, this seems to me the greatest. (114)

This “doubling” seems to trouble the concept of vision and what it is that has been seen even more than straight-forward ghost sighting. Yet for Crowe, the imperative point is to keep an open mind. She is certain that these experiences are real and because of this they are worthy of documenting and discussing.

Conclusion

This essay originated from a paper given at the conference co-hosted by the University of Leipzig and the Inklings Society entitled “Ghosts: A Conference of the (Nearly) Invisible”. This title suggests that ghosts are not (quite) invisible and that the concepts of *seeing* and ghosts are very often necessarily juxtaposed and as such Crowe's work is important in this discussion. Crowe herself took many of her sources from German texts and she was fluent in the language. Crowe had a deep love and respect for German culture and German people. She says:

I wish ... to make the English public acquainted with the ideas entertained on these subjects by a large proportion of German minds of the highest order. It is a distinctive characteristic of the thinkers of that country, that, in the first place, they do think indepen-

dently and courageously; and, in the second, that they never shrink from promulgating the opinions they have been led to form, however new, strange, heterodox, or even absurd, as they may appear to others.' (18)

Crowe attributes a national characteristic of courage and free and independent thinking. She wished to convey this to the British public and ascertains that it is Germans who have looked most seriously and deeply at phenomenon such as "phrenology and mesmerism" (18). In the preface to *The Night Side of Nature* she says that the title she has chosen for her book is a term:

I borrow from the Germans, who derive it from the astronomers, the latter denominating that side of a planet which is turned from the sun, its *night-side*. ... There are two or three books by German authors, entitled 'The Night-Side,' or 'The Night-Domination of Nature' which are on subjects, more or less analogous to mine (3–4).

Crowe was educated, cosmopolitan and very open minded. She was a vocal advocate for women's education and financial independence, was vehemently anti-slavery and spoke out on animal rights. Crowe is an important but often overlooked figure who greatly influenced the way the Victorians imagined the spectral. Crowe presents ghost stories but they are personal, individual visions and versions of what people believe that they have seen. Crowe's own view is wide and because she is detailing a vast array of ordinary people's visions of the (un)seen her work remains vibrant, relevant and innovative.

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