**Chapter 3**

**Cognition, Relevance and Early Modern Ghosts**

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**Introduction**

Historians and critics routinely interpret early modern ghost stories – fictional ones as well as purportedly ‘true accounts’ – primarily in relation to the *beliefs* that produced them. Beliefs about ghosts invite special scrutiny in an age where these – so it is thought – betrayed one’s theological position.[[1]](#footnote-1) To take only the best-known example, a long tradition of Shakespeare criticism has understood Hamlet’s equivocations before his father’s ghost to reflect those of the Anglican psychology more broadly: between a Catholic teaching that held fast to the doctrine of Purgatory (from which ghosts might be permitted a temporary return) and a Reformed soteriology that vigorously denounced it. Unusually attuned to these broader questions as to so much else, Shakespeare felt this tension, which found its way into his play.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This critical methodology seems so routine as scarcely to qualify as a ‘methodology’ at all. Ghosts, unlike (say) tables and chairs, are or were once objects of belief; apparitions have the character of epistemic events; naturally we refer literary occurrences to the intellectual and ideological commitments of authors and their readers. The religious crisis occasioned by the Reformation makes the study of the period’s ghost stories especially attractive. A properly attuned historicist criticism can show how disturbances in the early modern religious sphere might ripple into the literary one.

Yet seeing a ghost in any historical period, or hearing or reading a story about someone else who does so, is not simply an epistemic event; it is also a *cognitive* one. That is, before I even get as far as reflecting on my convictions about ghosts, the concept GHOST will have impinged in my cognitive environment in a form that appears relatively invariant across human culture: roughly, a person-like being not dissimilar to me, but with unusual physical properties.[[3]](#footnote-3) This much I cannot help. Irrespective of historically or geographically localised commitments to ghosts at the level of belief (e.g. whether they exist, return to the living, demand reburial or intercession, etc.), the information contained in the concept GHOST is composed of similar intuitions, and triggers similar basic inferences, in all human minds – of all beliefs and none. Regardless of what people might believe about ghosts, the concept GHOST is everywhere – a sometime visitor in the mental experience of practically everybody in the world.

Like certain other magical or religious concepts, GHOST has travelled well across our species; and recent work in cognitive anthropology has begun to suggest some reasons why. One possibility is that it has proven unusually *relevant* to human minds – that is, we might attribute its spread and historical tenacity not to any special properties inhering independently in GHOST itself, but rather on account of the ‘fit’ between the concept and a cognitive machinery adapted to accept it. On this view magical concepts would perhaps appear not so very different from tables and chairs after all: just as domestic furniture affords the human body certain kinds of action, so GHOST has become an affordance for the mind. Below I shall return to the notion of ‘relevance’, in the technical sense of that term. For now we might acknowledge a methodological possibility arising from this shift in focus from beliefs onto concepts: that when reading early modern ghost stories, it may be worth dwelling on their cognitive effects.

Despite the relative stability of GHOST as a cross-cultural concept, describing these effects in a given context is far from straightforward. This is because, as I shall argue here, ghosts are purveyors *par excellence* of cognitive confusion. This chapter examines a specific feature of this confusion: our contradictory intuitions about the physical properties of ghosts. It begins with a canonical instance in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,before introducing recent work on GHOST as a magical concept. The dominant perspective throughout will be that of Relevance Theory, a radical form of cognitive pragmatics that, as well as being influential in the anthropology of religion, seeks to explain how human minds handle ostensive communication (necessarily including literary communication). The final part of the essay offers a detailed case study of an early modern variant on Ovid’s narrative - and one of the most unusual ghost stories of the European Renaissance.

**The Limping Shadow**

Ovid’s retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice story (*Metamorphoses* X) includes a touching detail not present in other versions. Dancing through the grass after her wedding, Eurydice is suddenly killed by a poisonous snakebite to the ankle. Orpheus descends into the underworld, through the ‘unsubstantial throngs’ (*per leves populos*), and prays for the return of his dead bride. The ‘bloodless spirits’ (*exsangues animae*) weep at his song and then Eurydice appears, falteringly:

She was among the new shades and came with steps halting from her wound.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Eurydice *limps*. Her shade labours under the weight of a body it no longer possesses. While pagan ghosts often bear the mark of injuries incurred while still alive (scars, bloodied faces, etc.), there is something especially poignant about these ‘halting’ steps which, as the reader imagines them, necessarily invoke physical heft and strain, the careful distribution of weight across space. For of course there is no weight - only a trace of the prior corporeal life that Eurydice may now possibly regain.

Much hinges on what we are to understand by ‘and’ in this sentence (‘she was among the new shades *and* came with steps halting...’). Some readers, depending on their existing assumptions about the fate of the dead in the afterlife (as well as their assumptions about Ovid’sassumptions), might infer a cause-effect relation: Eurydice’s is a ‘new’ shade *and* *so* limps because her passage from life to death, from body to pure shadow, is not quite complete. Perhaps this transition, being only recent, really is reversible: perhaps there really is a way back to the living. But ultimately – and here the poignancy is redoubled – Eurydice’s limp condemns her. The path out of the underworld is steep (*adclivis*) and difficult (*arduus)*. Orpheus does not know if his struggling wife will endure it. So he looks back to make sure...

Ovid’s story illustrates what appears to be a widespread contradiction in how we think about the afterlife, and one that intensified in early modern Europe. For thousands of years, and across cultures, people have professed a conviction in the immateriality of the soul while remaining seemingly unable to imagine its post-mortem existence – its punishments or pleasures – as anything other than corporeal. Such incongruities are so frequent in Hades that we barely notice them: moments before the appearance of limping Eurydice Ovid refers to Tantalus’s thirst, Sispyphus’s rock, and the vultures pecking eternally at Tityus’s liver.[[5]](#footnote-5) In epic, visitors to the underworld are armed with swords to fight off shadows or, seeing the ghost of a loved one, try vainly to embrace it.[[6]](#footnote-6) These contradictions were not irresolvable. The shades of the classical underworld were to be understood as ‘simulchra’ (Ovid’s word) – i.e. shadows that exhibit pain or pleasure *as if* they maintained their material existence. This idea left a clear legacy in the Christian imaginary of the afterlife: in Dante’s *Inferno*,for example.

In early modern Europe, the Reformists’ challenge to the traditional doctrine of Purgatory blew wide open debates about ghosts and the afterlife, and the picture became especially confused.[[7]](#footnote-7) Humanist scholarship exposed an increasingly literate society to an array of ancient visions of the dead: not simply the *eidola* or *umbrae* of Greek and Roman myth but also, in authors such as Apuleius, Heliodorus, or Phlegon of Tralles, tales of departed men and women returning in their bodies. The transmission of Neoplatonic philosophy promoted by Marsilio Ficino raised the possibility that some spirits might be susceptible to pain.[[8]](#footnote-8) Journeys to new worlds and old, and the growth of comparative ethnography, revealed a widespread strain of ancestor-worship which placed its dead on the side of matter and, often, violence: the deceased Inca (emperor) Guyanacape, still feared by the Amerindians of Peru ‘as if he were still alive’; the terrifying *draugr* of the Northern peoples, rising out of their graves; or in the Far East, as the Jesuit missionaries reported, the Japanese festivals of the dead, where relatives left victuals on tombstones.[[9]](#footnote-9) Closer to home, the animistic lore of rural populations – in which the dead came to inhabit a tree, a hill, a toadstool – continued to flourish beyond the reach of any Church.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This recurrent urge to impose material form on the spirit world, even while professing its immaterial nature, deserves explanation. One approach would be to ascribe it to competing beliefsabout the dead. Thus one might speculate in the sixteenth-century context that this confusion has its roots in theimperfectly reconciled claims of lay and ‘official’ spirituality, for example. This is the view of the historian Walter Stephens, who argues that late-sixteenth century theologians emphasise the palpability of spirits as a means of rendering them more real to an ever-more sceptical populace.[[11]](#footnote-11) The alternative explored here seeks an explanation not simply among people’s beliefs, but additionally among their *concepts* and *intuitions*. These intuitions influence the ways we think about the dead regardless of our stated beliefs on the subject, and sometimes in spite of them. The following section will offer a simplified account of this process as it applies to magical concepts such as GHOST.

**Relevant Mysteries**

The most thoroughgoing cognitive account of magical concepts is offered by Pascal Boyer, a French anthropologist influenced by Relevance Theory.[[12]](#footnote-12) His *Religion Explained* (2001) opens with an invitation: to take a list of supernatural concepts and try to intuit which of them might plausibly form the basis for a religious system:

1. Some people are dead but they keep walking around. They cannot talk any more, they are not aware of what they are doing.
2. Some ebony trees can recall conversations people hold in their shade.
3. This wristwatch is special and will chime when it detects that your enemies are plotting against you.
4. If you drop this special ritual object it will fall downwards until it hits the ground.
5. The gods are watching us and they notice everything we do. But they forget everything instantaneously.
6. There is only one God. He has no way of finding out what goes on in the world.

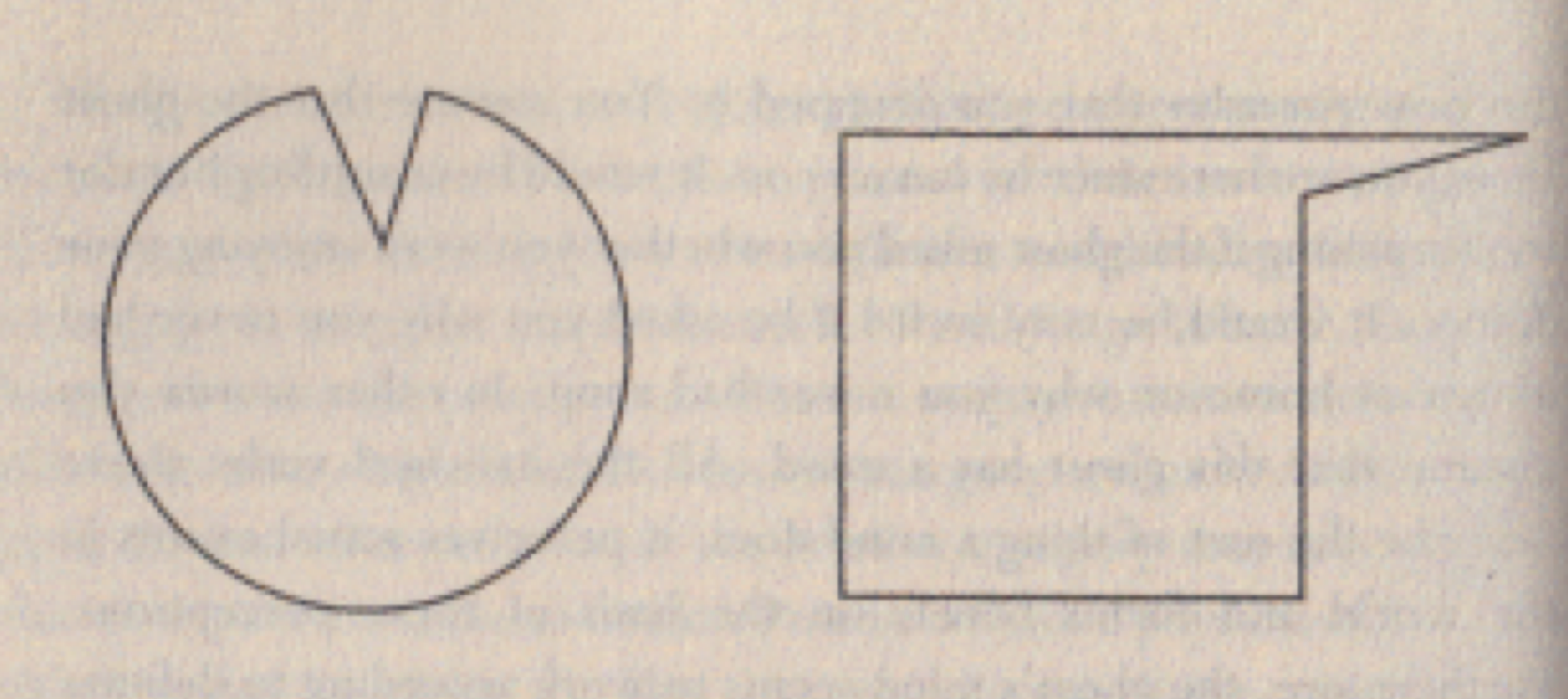
For Boyer, (1)-(3) are examples of ‘successful’ supernatural concepts. (1) and (2) are integral concepts within real-world religious systems; (3) describes an invented concept, but one which, according to Boyer’s prediction, most people would consider a good candidate. By contrast (4)-(6) do not quite hit the mark. The problem is not, of course, that these concepts seem implausible in relation to scientific or rational standards (on that basis the whole list would be disqualified); rather, something in the shape or structure of the concepts seems awry. How might our intuitions about the probable success or failure of religious concepts be accounted for?

For Boyer a successful concept, or mental representation, is simply one that has been widely transmitted via multiple acts of human communication. This success is not attributable to pure chance, he argues, but more plausibly ascribed to some form of ‘transmission advantage’. In attempting to explain what this advantage might consist of, Boyer adopts what the anthropologist Dan Sperber has termed an ‘epidemiological’ approach to cultural representations.[[13]](#footnote-13) The analogy with the spread of infectious diseases is a suggestive one. For scientists investigating the cause of disease transmission, knowledge of the pathogen itself is insufficient on its own; equally essential is understanding those features of human physiology that allows it to spread throughout the population. By the same token, anthropologists seeking to explain the transmission of supernatural representations must not simply attend to the representation itself, but also the mental architecture which allows it to take hold. Hence the need for a two-step description: of the successful concepts themselves, and of a cognitive system geared to act as their host.

In Boyer’s account, successful magical concepts display two elements in a specific relation. The first – a feature of all concepts – is membership of what he calls a basic ontological category (PERSON, TOOL, NATURAL OBJECT, PLANT, etc.). Each of these can be thought of as a kind of template, membership of which triggers its own routine intuitions. For example, PLANT calls to mind an entity that is inanimate (in the sense of lacking a mind or soul) has typical shape, grows and dies, needs water, sunlight and soil, and so on; any concept belonging to this category (ELM, DANDELION, etc.) will be instantly assumed to possess these characteristics. The second ingredient is a counter-intuitive violation that contradicts a *strictly limited* amount of information provided by the ontological category. Recall Boyer’s example, encountered among the Uduk-speaking peoples of Sudan, of the ebony tree which remembers conversations people hold in its shade. This tree belongs to the ontological category PLANT; and by exhibiting animacy – more specifically, the ability to produce mental representations – it flouts an important intuition we have about that category. Notice, though, that only this element is affected by the violation. All our other intuitions about PLANT are left untouched: we go on inferring that, in spite of its counterintuitive property, the magic tree still has typical shape, that it still grows, still needs water, sunlight and soil, and so forth. It is not the case that with successful magical concepts simply ‘anything goes’. Just one element has changed; everything else remains the same. This Boyer calls the principle of *limited counterintuitive violation.*

According to Boyer, magical concepts that obey this principle are those most likely to be stored, accessed and transmitted by a human cognitive system adapted for optimal efficiency. Why should this be so? Key to cognitive efficiency are the mechanisms of what he calls ‘default reasoning’. Default reasoning is vital in processing novel concepts of all kinds, not just magical ones. For example, upon encountering the concept KANGAROO for the first time, the cognitive system automatically carries across a wide range of default assumptions attached to the ontological category ANIMAL and applies them to the newcomer. Thus we infer that KANGAROO must be a physical entity, that it is animate, grows, feeds, dies, has internal organs identical to other members of the same species, has live young that will grow up to resemble its parents, and so on. The efficiency gain from proceeding in this way is considerable: default reasoning dispenses us from re-learning the same information every time we encounter a new member of the category. The process is akin to completing a template with most of the spaces already filled in. Although a new concept might specify only a very small number of unique features, the template enriches these to complete a highly informative picture. For this reason, as Boyer puts it, ‘*people have detailed representations even though they are not told much*’.

This drive towards cognitive efficiency continues to apply in the case of magical concepts, for which Boyer offers the analogous case of irregular shapes:



These two figures represent a visual analogue for limited counterintuitive violation. Although it may be just about possible to conceive of them as an entirely novel form, they are most easily perceived and stored in the memory as something like CIRCLE-minus-segment and SQUARE-plus-spike; this would also be the most efficient way of communicating their general features to another person unfamiliar with them. As with the magic tree concept, the reason such ‘counterintuitive’ figures are handled – perceived, remembered, transmitted to others – so efficiently by the cognitive system is that, because the adjustment is highly constrained, we can confidently activate all the default assumptions that the adjustment leaves untouched (e.g. that the right-hand figure is composed for the most part of solid lines meeting at right angles). Note in addition that the negative corollary also holds true: i.e. if more irregularities were added to the shapes above, fewer inferences could be carried over as defaults. These new figures would likely prove harder to perceive as shapes at all; we would also struggle to commit them to memory or communicate their structure verbally to someone else who has not seen them. Having forfeited the transmission advantage conferred by the limited violation, these would quickly prove to be ‘unsuccessful’ shapes.

Why should human cognition set such store by efficiency? It does not seem a matter of conscious volition. An important aspect of Boyer’s account is that the human mind does not *choose* to handle concepts in this way; on the contrary, the vast majority of people would find it difficult *not* to do so. Something about our cognitive architecture compels us. (From this we can see that the potentially misleading phrase ‘default *reasoning’* should not be taken to imply conscious deliberation, but a subpersonal cognitive routine). Boyer’s insistence on the mandatory aspect of default reasoning signals his debt to evolutionary accounts of cognition and, more narrowly, to the Relevance Theory of Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber. Elsewhere in *Religion Explained* he enlarges on his debt to Sperber and Wilson, according to whom human cognition is always geared towards those inputs from its environment that yield optimal *relevance*. The primary goal of Relevance Theory is to propose an account of human communication, not cognition. But the notion of relevance, and the evolutionary hypothesis on which it rests, may still be helpful in explaining why some conceptual inputs gain greater traction than others in the mental life of humans.

‘Relevance’ should here be understood in its strictly technical sense.[[14]](#footnote-14) Any number of potential inputs to cognition compete for an organism’s attention at a given time. No organism enjoys limitless attentional resources – least of all humans, whose cognitive environment includes at any moment not only what is currently available to them in perception, but also the vast data-store available in memory. Sperber and Wilson argue that humans must have evolved some mechanism to allocate these resources efficiently. From this supposition they derive their ‘cognitive principle of relevance’:

*Cognitive Principle of Relevance*

Human cognition tends to be geared towards the maximisation of relevance.

Relevance is here to be understood as a function of two factors: cognitive effects (or reward) and processing effort. For Sperber and Wilson, those inputs we deem most relevant in any given environment will be the ones that, when combined with other contextual information and our existing assumptions, are liable to provide *maximum cognitive effects for minimum cognitive effort*. Inputs, including concepts, that fit this criterion become relevant, and as such produce a change in the subject’s cognitive environment; other, less relevant potential inputs recede into the background.

Transposing this idea into Boyer’s account, we might suggest that certain magical concepts do not succeed because they are any more *true* than their less successful rivals – that is, better reflections of our external reality; they do so because they are more *relevant*. They offer a better fit with a human mind adapted to harvest maximum information from its environment at minimum cognitive expense. Tested over thousands of years of storytelling, GHOST has proved an especially clear example of fitness in this sense, and of the principle of limited counterintuitive violation on which it depends. Boyer’s own analysis of GHOST is worth quoting in full:

The concept is that of a PERSON that has counterintuitive physical properties. Unlike other persons ghosts can go through solid objects like walls. But notice that, apart from this, these ghosts follow very strictly the ordinary intuitive concept PERSON. Imagine a ghost suddenly materialises in your home as you are having dinner. Startled by this sudden appearance, you drop your spoon in your bowl of soup. In a situation like this your mind creates a whole lot of assumptions that you do not necessarily represent consciously. For instance, you assume that the ghost *saw* you were having dinner so that he now *knows* that you were eating. Also, the ghost probably *heard* the sound of your spoon landing in your soup and can now *remember* that you dropped it. You assume that the ghost *knows* you are here since he can *see* you. It would be unsettling but not too surprising if the ghost asked you whether you were enjoying your dinner. It would be very weird if he asked you why you never had dinner at home or why you never have soup. In other words you assume that this ghost has a mind. All the italicised verbs above describe the sort of thing a mind does: it perceives actual events in the world and forms beliefs on the basis of these perceptions.

If we were to reformulate Boyer’s example in Relevance-Theoretic terms, we could say that understanding the concept GHOST comes at only a limited cognitive price: we simply take the ontological template PERSON and subtract from it ‘has a normal human body’. As with the magical tree, every other inferential mechanism normally prompted by the source category continues to yield a rich array of cognitive effects: we go on inferring the same range of perceptual and mental states, such as *seeing*, *hearing*, *thinking, remembering,* etc., as would usually be generated by the concept PERSON. Compared to the counterintuitive element (the ghost that ‘suddenly materialises’), these default inferences may appear banal, as Boyer notes. Nonetheless, that very banality suggests how much default reasoning silently undergirds our supernatural concepts. No special cognitive mechanism is required to process GHOST, no unique programme that applies only to it. Ghosts may be mysterious, but they are a relevant mystery – conceptual grist to the default operations of our ordinary mental life.

**Cognitive Confusions**

What kind of insights might Boyer’s understanding of supernatural concepts bring to bear on the problem of ghostly bodies? Before addressing this question directly it is worth returning briefly to the difference between intuitions and beliefs. One important distinction concerns degrees of awareness and commitment. Beliefs imply conscious adherence, however uncertain or provisional, to a set of propositions at least potentially available for self-report: I believe that ‘dead souls are disembodied’, that ‘the soul dies with the body’, and so on. These may be buttressed by institutional support (doctrine), or may operate outside it (folk beliefs). By contrast my intuitions about the concept GHOST – as a PERSON minus a body + the application of default inferences – function for the most part under the threshold of consciousness. (Indeed, if this procedure were to operate with our full awareness it might become difficult to go on thinking at all.) Intuitions are not acquired either by a process of rational deliberation or by an outbreak of emotional conviction; they are a product of the explanatory mechanisms I wield by virtue of having the kind of mind that human beings have. I can to some extent choose my beliefs, but I cannot choose my intuitions. And I possess the concept GHOST, and a set of intuitions about it, irrespective of whether I possess the belief.

A corollary of this difference between beliefs and intuitions concerns degrees of variability. Beliefs vary. They vary across cultures and history; they can also do so within a single individual. I can be ideologically coerced, or simply persuaded, to increase or decrease my commitment to my current beliefs, or transform them altogether. Furthermore, I can temporarily revise or suspend my beliefs (say, about the fate of the dead) in order to entertain somebody else’s. When I willingly enter the storyworld of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example, I may temporarily try on a set of beliefs not my own: recent work in cognitive narratology has investigated the mechanisms of ‘tagging’ and ‘decoupling’ required to sustain (but also keep in check) readers’ immersion in fictional worlds.[[15]](#footnote-15) By contrast the intuitions and inferences that drive default reasoning are not so malleable. Whatever my conscious beliefs, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to shut down the inferential system that, say, attributes mental states to PERSON-like concepts: the witness to the ghost in Boyer’s example would struggle to do so even if he tried. In this respect, our cognitive system places important constraints on supernatural thinking. While beliefs in ghosts and the afterlife vary widely, their conceptual underpinnings remain very consistent from one culture to another.

We might wish to conclude from all this that our beliefs about ghosts are messy and variable, while our basic intuitions about them are stable and unchanging. This might hold true at the anthropological level of description; but in specific instances such a claim would be quite wrong. The dead pose a particular challenge to the normal operation of human inferencing systems. This challenge is felt most viscerally in the presence of human corpses. Although, conceptually speaking, CORPSE ought properly to belong to the category OBJECT, most people treat CORPSE as a limited modification of the concept PERSON, with animacy (and with it goal-directed action and intentional states) subtracted. Executing this subtraction in the presence of a real instance is less straightforward than this description makes it seem, however. Inference mechanisms that operated prior to the person’s death often continue to function in spite of it, especially in the case of someone to whom we felt emotionally attached. The so-called ‘person-file’ system, with which we recognise familiar faces, is not easily switched off: the system continues to deliver the usual sense of recognition, and with it a host of affective responses, despite our conscious awareness that the person is no longer ‘there’. Similarly, our so-called ‘Theory of Mind’ mechanism may continue to run inferential routines geared towards attributing mental representations to the corpse: e.g. perceptual or affective states (e.g. anger). This is especially likely to occur if its eyes remain open: gaze-tracking is among our most ancient modes of intuiting others’ goal-directed actions. The compulsion to go on imputing intentional states to something we ‘know’ to be an object does much to explain the uncanny sensation produced by not just corpses, but also portraits, dolls, puppets, and masks.

The cognitive confusion induced by corpses also arises in response to other states we imagine for the dead. ZOMBIE has proven a highly successful magical concept, and obeys Boyer’s rule of limited counterintuitive violation: ZOMBIE is conceptualised as a PERSON minus intentional states. And yet, like CORPSE, this concept is liable to induce cognitive contradictions. However deeply embedded the intuition that zombies lack volition, personal identity, and so on, we may find it unnervingly difficult to resist making these attributions when confronted with (or just imagining) an actual example. Film-makers such as George A. Romero play on exactly this disjunction for dramatic effect. Most zombie movies contain some version of the chilling moment at which the audience spots, among the anonymous hordes, a familiar character from earlier in the film who has now joined the legions of the dead. Such moments achieve their shock because familiar characters are likely to prompt the inference of emotions and purposes – more especially if we had felt sympathetic to these while the character was still alive – even though this inner life is the very element excluded by the concept ZOMBIE. The impact of such instances is a product of cognitive confusion, of multiple inference systems running out of synch.

A similar disjunction may affect the way we think of ghosts. Recall Boyer’s characterisation of the GHOST concept as PERSON with counterintuitive physical properties. Though this structure may be relatively stable in our conceptual archive, in some specific instances the counterintuitive violation seems inhibited. As with ZOMBIE, the countervailing pull of the ontological category is especially felt by those with strong attachments to the deceased. The ancient epic trope of ‘the vain embrace’, in which a visitor to Hades (Aeneas, Achilles) tries and fails to grasp a beloved ghost (Creusa, Patroclus etc), illustrates the point:

Thrice I strove to throw my arms around her neck; thrice the form, vainly clasped, fled from my hands, even as light winds, and most like a winged dream.[[16]](#footnote-16)

However firm Aeneas’s conviction that he is in the presence of a shade, he feels no less compelled to reach out and touch it. PERSON-inferences discarded in the magical subconcept have begun to reassert themselves, such that Creusa – at least in his confused understanding – is momentarily endowed with something like a body. The hero’s confusion is only ‘corrected’ when the ghost suddenly takes flight, cruelly reaffirming the counterintuitive element.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice shares the affective atmosphere of these epic episodes – limping Eurydice appears amid tears and laments – and can be read as a distended version of the same motif: eventually Orpheus too will reach out, and Eurydice vanish. But not before PERSON inferences have been allowed to linger far longer than is usually the case. Eurydice does not disappear straight away; instead the possibility of her reversion to the ontological category is held open as an integral feature of the plot and its suspense. Her limping gait, a vestige of the body she might yet recover, emerges as a mark of this reversion – one that occurs not as the sudden substitution of one concept (PERSON) for another (GHOST), but a step-wise inferential adjustment between them. If Boyer’s analysis is right, GHOST and PERSON are conceptually continuous, however great we might believe the gulf between the living and the dead: our cognitive system handles the first as a minimal – and perhaps thereby reversible – modification of the second. The slope up which Eurydice struggles with her husband describes a path not between two radically discontinuous domains but – precisely – a *gradient* on which categories blur.

**Interlude: Relevance and Communication**

Such moments of inferential confusion do not invalidate Boyer’s account of magical concepts. But the singular instance suggests a level of complexity elided in the epidemiological picture, concerned as it is with multiple episodes of transmission. In anthropological case-studies, not to mention narrative worlds as complex as Ovid’s, magical phenomena only rarely appear as pristine tokens of their conceptual type; far more commonly we are required to loosen the concept in such a way that the phenomenon comes to appear only GHOST-like or ZOMBIE-like. This is partly because the dead seem particularly apt to throw our inference systems into conflict, as we have seen; and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are of course especially rich in instances of transitional or in-between states. But it is also a more general consequence of the way, according to Boyer, concepts are transmitted in specific instances of human communication.

In Relevance Theory, the inferential model of communication on which Boyer draws, ad-hoc contextual adjustments form an integral part of utterance interpretation. The reason for this becomes more readily apparent when the inferential model is distinguished from code-models of human communication. On the code model, speakers or writers linguistically encode their intended meaning, and hearers or readers then recover that meaning by decrypting it using an identical copy of the code. In Relevance Theory, the encoded concept (e.g. that indicated by ‘umbra’ in Ovid's narrative) provides only one clue as to the speaker’s overall intention, an approximation of which the hearer will only gain by ‘enriching’ it according to what Sperber and Wilson call the communicative principle of relevance:

*Communicative principle of relevance*

Every ostensive stimulus (e.g. an utterance) conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

This second or communicative principle of relevance follows on from the first or cognitive principle invoked above. Because human beings know that other members of their species are geared to scan their cognitive environment for the most relevant inputs, they are able to manipulate that assumption for communicative ends. More specifically, they are able to make themselves understood as meaning far more than they ever have to say.

Take an everyday example.[[18]](#footnote-18) Jack and Jill are standing in Jill’s kitchen. Jill looks at Jack, looks at her washing machine, and utters the following words:

(1) Open it.

In order for Jack to grasp Jill’s intended meaning, he has most obviously to perform the task of assigning a referent to the pronoun ‘it’, made relatively easy by the direction of her gaze. But his task is not finished there. Notice that, in a different way, the meaning of ‘open’ too is underspecified. The encoded, semantic meaning of the verb is only part of the story; it will not be enough, if he wants to understand Jill, simply to scan a mental dictionary entry for the item ‘open’ (in which a list of all possible variables of ‘x opens y’ would in any case have to extend indefinitely).[[19]](#footnote-19) If Jack is a friend inclined to help Jill with her laundry, he will assume her to intend (and to intend that he will interpret her as intending) that he should open the washing-machine door. But if he is a plumber, then ‘open it’ might be an instruction to remove the casing at the back. How Jack interprets Jill is only partly guided by the encoded meaning of her utterance: the rest he must ‘fill out’ with reference to the immediate context, and by deciding which of his assumptions (about washing-machines, and about his relationship with Jill) Jill is trying to direct his attention towards. The result of this procedure will be the first contextually derived ‘ad-hoc’ concept (OPEN\*) that satisfies Jack’s expectation of relevance.[[20]](#footnote-20) According to Relevance Theory, the construction of ad-hoc concepts is an inevitable part of a communication system in which words encode only a tiny proportion of what it is possible to mean.

The final part of this essay attempts to bring together Boyer’s theory of magical concepts and a relevance-theoretic approach to linguistic utterances. The utterance in question here, an early modern variant of Ovid’s story, provides a further moment of friction between the anthropological theory and the singular instance. It also raises a question not considered so far: what modes of writing, and writing strategies, does cognitive confusion elicit in the early modern period?

***Quasi Phantasma*: The Widower’s Tale**

In 1555 the German poet and scholar Georg Sabinus (1508-1560) published a Latin commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, professing on its title page to elucidate the ‘moral, ethical and physical’ questions raised by Ovid’s poem. When Sabinus arrives at Book X, and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, he opens immediately with the following narrative:

I heard a tale [*fabulam*] similar to that of Orpheus, if tale is the right word, since many hold it to be a true account [*historiam*]. A gentleman of Bavaria was badly afflicted by the death of his wife, living alone, and refusing all attempts at consolation. After many tears and laments his wife appeared to him and told him that having heard his importunate pleas, God had brought her back to life that she might live with him, but only on condition that they be remarried by a priest with solemn rites, and that from now on he should no longer curse or blaspheme as he did before – the reason for her death, and something which would deprive him of her once more if he should return to his bad ways. These formalities completed, the wife took up home with him as before, even bearing children, though she was pale and sad. After many years [*post multos annos*] the husband, being drunk one evening, flew into a rage at a servant, and said many things that contravened his promise. His wife, who had left the room to fetch some apples for him, suddenly vanished leaving her clothes standing without a body, almost/as if a ghost [*quasi phantasma*], beside the fruit box. I heard this from many trustworthy men, who themselves affirm that they were present when the Duke of Bavaria recounted it to the Duke of Saxony. But let us expound the tale of Orpheus… [*Sed Orphei fabulam exponamus*…][[21]](#footnote-21)

This story has received no modern commentary, yet it contains a number of remarkable features, not least its similarities with the Ovidian original. The widower’s prayer echoes that of Orpheus among the shades, while the prohibition on ‘turning back’ is transposed into a moral proviso – that the husband not return to his former violence. But most striking of all is the (un)dead woman at its centre. What is the reader to imagine – that is to say, represent conceptually – when reading her story? Several difficulties arise.

The first concerns the time-frame of the apparition. Sabinus’s narrative effectively constructs a counterfactual future for Ovid’s tale: Orpheus and Eurydice have reached home and resumed domestic life (here represented in the reference to apples and the fruit-box). This arrangement lasts ‘for many years’ (*per multos annos*) – a dispensation highly untypical of early modern ghost stories, in which the return of a dead person normally marks only a temporary interruption in the ordinary course of nature. Exceptions of this kind prove disconcerting. Comparison might be made with the biblical passage describing how after Christ’s resurrection, ‘the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.’ (Matthew 27: 52-3). Early modern commentators such as Jean Calvin and André Valladier followed Augustine in wondering whether these risen men subsequently resumed their former lives or sloped back to their tombs.[[22]](#footnote-22) But Scripture is silent on the matter, and a troubling absence of finality persists.

Can a dead woman who takes up her former life, remarries, and fetches fruit for her husband, properly be considered an instance of GHOST? It is not simply the deceased wife’s longevity – what one might call in this context her ontological stamina – that seems to contradict our intuitions. That longevity is sealed with a second astonishing feat: that of giving birth to children. In this she seems all but to complete the transition back to the living haltingly begun by her classical precursor. The dead wife returns not just in a body, but one capable of having sex, generating and sustaining life – a phenomenon quite exceptional in pre-modern accounts of the return of the dead. As with Eurydice’s limp, only more so, embodiment prompts a marked equivocation between GHOST and PERSON, in which default inferences attached to the latter category begin to reassert themselves.

Certain linguistic markers strengthen this sense of conceptual in-betweenness, notably a sequence of what Relevance theorists term ‘procedural’ and ‘scalar’ expressions. Procedurals (other English examples of which include certain uses of ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘after all’, and ‘nevertheless’) do not themselves encode conceptual representations but serve instead to signal and constrain the relevance of the overall utterance: that is, to point the hearer towards shared (‘mutually manifest’) assumptions likely to yield a maximally relevant interpretation.[[23]](#footnote-23) The phrase ‘*even* giving birth to children, *though* pale and sad’ contains two procedural markers. In this context ‘even’ cues the reader’s access to an implicated premise (1) and an implicated conclusion (2):

(1) GHOST-like women are usually incapable of childbirth.

(2) This concept is PERSON-like.

‘Though pale and sad’, for its part, immediately qualifies (2) as its premise, while preserving the original premise as its implicated conclusion:

(3) This concept is GHOST-like (i.e., ‘pale and sad’ = physically diminished).

(4) GHOST-like women are usually incapable of childbirth.

The procedural markers signal the relevance of both GHOST and PERSON, but in such a way that each partially cancels the default inferences normally triggered by the other. Sabinus prompts us to imagine a conceptual chiasmus: a ghost-woman, or woman-ghost, hovering between the categories with which we organise our mental life.

This contextually adjusted, in-between, representation is further strengthened in the mysterious scalar ‘quasi phantasma’ – the phrase used to describe the manner in which the returned woman vanishes.[[24]](#footnote-24) The word ‘phantasma’ is given special salience as the only term in this passage that explicitly names a supernatural phenomenon. But what of ‘quasi’? In common with other scalars (other examples include ‘some’, ‘most’, and ‘any’), the force of ‘quasi phantasma’ arrives not simply via its encoded, dictionary meaning (‘like a ghost’, ‘almost a ghost’, ‘as if a ghost’) but via a process of pragmatic enrichment in which the reader additionally infers ‘like [but therefore not identical to] a ghost’, ‘almost [but therefore not quite]a ghost’, ‘as if [but not in fact] a ghost’. Even as the wife evaporates into thin air, ‘quasi’ marks a limit beyond which GHOST inferences fail to carry through. As in the Ovidian original, the ontological category PERSON is lent a strange persistence, like the clothes still standing empty in the pantry.

**Apposite Thinking**

Any relevance-theoretic reading of Sabinus’s story must contend with the author’s intention. Why tell it, and why here? Framing devices signal various directions in which its relevance might be sought. Candidates include the author’s personal investment in its transmission (‘I heard [...] I heard’) and in its prior circulation among trusted or authoritative individuals (the Dukes of Bavaria and Saxony); in its status as a true account (*historia*) rather than a purely fictional one (*fabula*); in its potential for moral exposition; and in its similarity with the Ovidian original. Any one of these might be thought sufficient to warrant readers’ attention though, as we shall see, the matter is far from simple.

Given the political atmosphere in 1555, it is tempting to seek out Sabinus’s motives among his theological commitments. These were far less equivocal than Shakespeare’s. He was a prominent Lutheran – first rector of the newly founded Lutheran university of Königsberg, and the son-in-law of Philipp Melanchthon. Lutherans of this period usually discredit ghost narratives as Catholic propaganda in favour of the Popish doctrine of Purgatory. Perhaps the fact that Catholic Bavaria is given the role of storyteller is to be read as a veiled swipe at Papist gullibility; possibly the reference to ‘trustworthy men’ is intended as ironic. But these elements are subtle, if discernible at all, and would be quite uncharacteristic of a work which generally eschews sectarian polemics. Whatever readers might assume Sabinus’s religious allegiances to be, the narrative does not make these assumptions sufficiently manifest to warrant a conclusion of polemical intent.

Attempts to read the story with reference to Sabinus’s beliefs run up against a further difficulty: his uncertain commitment to its truth-value. The opening line invokes the familiar historiographical distinction between *fabula* and *historia*. This is usually a means of placing the ensuing narrative on the side of the latter; but here the priority is more equivocal. Superficially ‘if tale is the right word’ might appear an instance of *correctio* (i.e. ‘this – no not this but something else’); and yet ‘if’ here does not so much cancel the possibility of the fictive as sustain it in a different mode. Likewise, in ‘*many* hold it to be a true account’, ‘many’ does not simply encode ‘a significant proportion’ (as it does later in ‘many tears and laments’, ‘many years’, ‘many things’). Here it also includes a scalar implicature: the reader is expected to infer that ‘many [*but not all*] hold it to be true.’ We might say that the narrative frame at once invites the reader to credit the ensuing narrative, and leaves the door ajar for a sceptical retreat.[[25]](#footnote-25)

If literal truth cannot be assumed for Sabinus’s narrative, then any mention of the higher truths promised by his title – physical, and especially ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ – are just as conspicuously lacking. This absence may appear surprising given that an explanatory scheme lay so near at hand. Accounts analogous to this one multiplied across Europe in the years 1570-1600, at the height of the witch craze, when demonologists routinely interpret them as machinations of the devil. Augustin Lercheimer and Nicolas Rémy both report similar tales, in which the putative wife is in each instance revealed to be a demon who has taken up her corpse.[[26]](#footnote-26) The early seventeenth-century theologian René Du Pont sees the devil’s hand in all such cases, noting in addition that any offspring issuing from them are bound also to be ‘false’ (‘des enfans supposez’).[[27]](#footnote-27) Du Pont’s reference to children strongly suggests that he had read Sabinus’s account, as does a reference to Orpheus and Eurydice in which he effectively diabolises the Ovidian fable:

And what do the philosophers mean to say through their fable of Orpheus’s descent into the underworld, to recover his wife, if not that he resurrected her by means of magic arts, conjuring into her inanimate body some devil who made her seem alive (yet the spell was so short-lived, and his curiosity in examining her so great, that immediately he lost her once more.)[[28]](#footnote-28)

It was perhaps in regard to this changing climate that a later editor of Sabinus’s commentary includes a shoulder note to the tale of the revenant wife, in which a general admonition is issued against looking back too fondly and, in particular, nostalgic lust for a dead spouse. Though the note is not explicitly demonological in thrust, it aligns Sabinus’s widower with a growing list of demonic dupes and, by doing so, delivers the *interpretatio ethica* promised in the title. In the original 1555 version, by contrast, no such apparatus is on hand to clinch the relevance of the widower’s tale.

A final possibility arises: that Sabinus considered the parallels with Ovid sufficient in themselves to warrant the attention of his readers. For all his other equivocations, the author foregrounds these quite explicitly: ‘I heard a tale similar to that of Orpheus...’. Notice that such parallels are not proffered as a feature of commentary proper. This much is suggested by the procedural phrase marking the transition to the next portion of his text: ‘*sed* Orphei fabulam exponamus ...’ (‘*but* let us expound the fable of Orpheus...’). This transition to the ‘true’ commentary seemingly instates the widower’s tale as ‘mere’ interpolation, an incidental adjunct to the proper business of the work. But it can also be construed more positively. Like ‘if’ (‘*if* tale is the right word...’), ‘sed’ marks off an enabling limit beyond which he invites us to suspend truth-value, religious, moral or ethical conviction. It prompts the reader to seek relevance not on the vertical axis of exposition – that of word-to-world fit or the allegorical *altior sensus* – but instead on the horizontal plane of pure apposition. The narrative becomes relevant insofar as it is *apposite*.

Apposite thinking was arguably fundamental to Renaissance humanist activity (though not exclusive to it, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* being one prestigious precursor). Through it scholars of the period established their textual parallels, built up their commonplaces and, in their syncretistic appositions of pagan myth and revealed truth, enabled and enacted the freedom to philosophize. Provisional and experimental, the task of the apposite thinker was not to expound but heuristically suspend propositions, commitments, and beliefs, all the more earnestly where – as was the case with ghosts – the topic appeared strapped to ideological extremes. Sabinus’s is only one among a large number of supernatural narratives to share exactly this appositional character. A longer investigation might include any number of kindred instances in Boaistuau and Belleforest’s *Histoires prodigieuses*, the *Histoires admirables* of Simon Goulart, or the *diverses leçon* of Pedro Mexía, Antoine Du Verdier, and Louis Guyon. Even some demonology has this flavour, for instance portions of Pierre Le Loyer’s compendium of ghost-lore, the *IIII Livres des spectres*.[[29]](#footnote-29)But perhaps Montaigne in his *Essais,* a masterwork of apposite thinking, best sums up the appeal of supernatural tales in ‘On the Power of the Imagination’:

So in the study I am making of our behaviour and motives, fabulous testimonies, provided they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they have happened or no, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, they exemplify, at all events, some human potentiality […][[30]](#footnote-30)

1. See Keith Thomas’s oft-quoted claim that ‘Although it may be a relatively frivolous question today to ask whether or not one believes in ghosts, it was in the sixteenth century a shibboleth which distinguished Protestant from Catholic almost as effectively as belief in the Mass or Papal Supremacy’, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997 [1st ed. 1971]), p. 589. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This chapter will follow the usual practice in linguistics of capitalising concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘[…] umbras erat illa recentes / inter et incessit passu de vulnere tardo’, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 48-49. I have used Frank Justus Miller’s English translation for the Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Metamorphoses* X, 40-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On drawing swords against ghosts, see Homer, *The Odyssey*, X, 535-37; Virgil, *Aeneid* VI, 260. On the motif of the ‘vain embrace’, see below p. 0000. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Timothy Chesters, *Ghost Stories in Late Renaissance France: Walking by Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Notably the demonological dialogue of the eleventh-century Byzantine philosopher Michael Psellos; see Chesters, *Ghost Stories*, pp. 175-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On ghosts in the New World, see Chesters, *Ghost Stories*, pp. 154-63; on the *draugr*, popularised by Saxo Grammaticus in the Middle Ages and later in the cosmography of Olaus Magnus, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), p. 13; on Japanese festivals of the dead, see Claude Guichard, *Funerailles et diverses manieres d’ensevelir des Rommains, Grecs, et autres nations, tant anciennes que modernes* (Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1581), pp. 395-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On popular ghost beliefs in pre-modern Europe, see Emmanuel Leroy-Ladurie, *Montaillou: village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), ch. 26 (‘Folklore et revenants’); Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen-Âge* (Paris: Imago, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dan Sperber, ‘Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations’, *Man*, New Series, 20.1 (1985), 73-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For recent introductions to Relevance Theory, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Yan Huang, *Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 181-208; Billy Clark, *Relevance Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On source-tagging and decoupling, see Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, ‘Consider the Source: The Evolution of Adaptations for Decoupling and Metarepresentation’ in *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Dan Sperber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 53-115; applied to literary immersion, see especially Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 47-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum; / ter frustra comprensa manus effugit imago, / par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno’. Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. by Henry Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), II, 792-94. The episode of Achilles and Patroclus is recounted in Homer, *Iliad* XXIII, 99-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the many early modern variants of this trope, in Ronsard, Shakespeare and elsewhere, see Chesters, *Ghost Stories*, pp. 12, 175-85. Early modern psychology would have understood Aeneas’s perception in terms of illusory *species*; see Katherine Park, ‘The Organic Soul’, in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. by Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 464-84 (471-72); on sensory illusion see also the contributions of Giglioni and Maus de Rolley to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Adapted from Sperber and Wilson, *Meaning and Relevance*, pp. 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On this point, see John Searle, ‘The Background of Meaning’ in John Searle and Ferenc Kiefer (eds), *Speech-Act Theory and Pragmatics* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980), pp. 221-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jack has here followed the so-called ‘relevance-guided comprehension heuristic’, which Clark defines as follows: ‘(i) Follow a path of least effort in deriving cognitive effects: test interpretations (e.g. disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. (ii) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.’; *Relevance Theory*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Georg Sabinus, *Fabularum Ovidii interpretatio* (Vitebergae: haeredes Georgii Rhaw, 1555), sigs Lviiir-v. The English translation is my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jean Calvin, *Commentaires de Jehan Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament*, 4 vols (Paris: C. Meyruis, 1854-55), I, 722; André Valladier, *La Saincte Philosophie de l’ame* (Paris: J. du Puys, 1614), p. 692. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The procedural/conceptual distinction originates in Diane Blakemore, *Semantic Constraints on Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). For an updated account, see the same author’s *Relevance and Linguistic Meaning: The Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse Markers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 89-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For a recent relevance-theoretic account of scalars, see Robyn Carston, ‘Informativeness, Relevance, and Scalar Implicature’ in *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications*, ed. by Robyn Carston and Seiji Uchida (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), 179-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kirsti Sellevold pays similarly literary-critical attention to scalars in her ‘Reading Short Forms Cognitively: Mindreading and Procedural Expressions in La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère’ in *Reading Literature Cognitively* (= *Paragraph* 37.1) ed. by Terence Cave, Karin Kukkonen and Olivia Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 96-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Augustin Lercheimer [= Hermann Witekind], *Christlich bedencken und erinnerung von Zauberey* (Heidelberg: J. Müller and H. Aven, 1585); Nicolaus Remigius [= Nicolas Rémy], *Daemonolatreiae libri tres* (Lyon: ex. off. Vicentii, 1595), p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. René Du Pont, *La Philosophie des esprits* (Paris: veuve G. de la Nouë, 1602), sigs Evir-v. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Du Pont, *La Philosophie des esprits*, sigs Ffiiiir-v. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. (Angers: G. Nepfveu, 1586). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. by D. Frame (London: Everyman, 2003), p. 91. For a relevance-theoretic approach to Montaigne’s *Essais*, see Kirsti Sellevold, *J’aime ces mots: expressions linguistiques de doute dans les ‘Essais’ de Montaigne* (Paris: Champion, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)