Introduction

Mrs. Ferguson is a vampire.

There should be no doubt about this: two reliable eyewitnesses have observed her, on separate occasions, sucking blood from the neck of her infant son. "On one occasion … this child had been left by its nurse for a few minutes. A loud cry from the baby, as of pain, called the nurse back. As she ran into the room she saw her employer, the lady, leaning over the baby and apparently biting his neck." Apparently? Surely more than that: "There was a small wound in the neck from which a stream of blood had escaped."[1] The mother bribes the nurse to keep quiet about what she has seen, a gesture difficult to interpret otherwise than as an admission of guilt. From then on the nurse closely watches the mother, the mother closely watches the nurse, and both closely watch the baby. "Day and night the nurse covered the child, and day and night the silent, watchful mother seemed to be lying in wait as a wolf waits for a lamb" ("SV," p. 537). Or as a vampire waits for her prey.

Fearing for the child's life, the nurse confesses everything to Mr. Ferguson. Convinced that his wife is as devoted a mother as she is a loving spouse, and outraged by the nurse's scandalous accusation, he scornfully tells her "that she was dreaming, that her suspicions were those of a lunatic, and that such libels upon her mistress were not to be tolerated" ("SV," p. 537). Moments later, however, the evidence of his own eyes leaves him no choice but to believe the nurse's wild story. "While they were talking a sudden cry of pain was heard. Nurse and master rushed together to the nursery. Imagine his feelings, Mr. Holmes," says Mr. Ferguson (speaking of himself in the third person), "as he saw his wife rise from a kneeling position beside the cot and saw blood upon the child's exposed neck and upon the sheet. With a cry of horror, he turned his wife's face to the light and saw blood all round her lips. It was she – she beyond all question – who had drunk the poor baby's blood" ("SV," pp. 537–8). Seeing is believing. Mrs. Ferguson is a vampire.

But we know that this cannot be the case, that what the nurse and the husband saw, all appearance to the contrary, must have been something that only looks like vampirism. We know this not because we have read the ending first, as some of us (myself included) are tempted to do with mysteries, but because we are reading a Sherlock Holmes story – and in Holmes's world there are no such things as vampires. "Rubbish, Watson, rubbish!" Holmes exclaims in one of the rare moments when he loses his temper. "What have we to do with walking corpses who can only be held in their grave by stakes driven through their hearts? It's pure lunacy." Watson does not disagree. He proposes, however, that "the vampire [is] not necessarily a dead man," and that "[a] living person might have the habit." He recalls having read somewhere of the legend "of the old sucking the blood of the young in order to retain their youth." Although Watson does not expressly say so, the legend provides a template for understanding how behaviors regarded as socially deviant may be perceived as unnatural – how the unusual is discursively transfigured into the unnatural or supernatural, and how transformations of this kind are always contingent upon who has power and authority to judge behaviors as normal or abnormal, and upon when and where this power is exercised. To ascribe this level of sociological insight to Watson is perhaps to give him too much credit. Holmes, in any case, is not interested in theories of othering or cultural criticism. To him the story of the aged drinking the blood of the young smacks of the kind of gory sensationalism and superstition-ridden hearsay where the odd gives way to the occult and the supernatural is permitted to sneak in through the back door. He insists that "[t]his agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply" ("SV," p. 535).

Indeed, vampires, ghosts, and similar agencies cannot, *must not* apply in detective fiction. For if Holmes were seriously to consider that Mrs. Ferguson may be a vampire, and consequently that what he had always regarded as "rubbish" and "pure lunacy" may have some truth to it after all, then what we are reading – regardless of whether or not the mystery turns out to have a rational (i.e. non-supernatural) solution – is not the sort of detective story we are used to. In fact, it may not be a detective story at all but something that only resembles one: a mischievous simulacrum of a detective story, maybe, that preserves the superficial features of the genre while stretching its epistemological and ontological coordinates out of shape, expanding the range of plausible theories, legitimate inferences, and lawful deductions, so that what ought to be rejected without a second thought (vampires, ghosts, and similar "rubbish") turns out

to be very much applicable. And if applicable in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire," one of Doyle's later stories, in what previous adventures as well? Might the favored rational solution always have been a reactionary oversimplification of a larger cosmic riddle (to be deliberately vague about it) whose troublesome loose ends are in detective fiction tucked out of sight, systematically censored because they challenge the detective's "flat-footed" understanding of the world? Holmes's sarcastic "dry chuckle" at a case that he suspects will be "a mixture of the modern and the mediaeval, of the practical and of the wildly fanciful" ("SV," p. 534) is haunted by anxiety about the consequences of this unlawful mixing, whereby what is denied entrance into the genre manages to insinuate itself into it. The mere mention of the supernatural, even if it is immediately dismissed as inapplicable, is enough to make the detective feel displaced, not just historically (has he been teleported into the Middle Ages?) but also genre-wise: "[B]ut really we seem to have been switched on to a Grimms' fairy tale" ("SV," p. 535), he peevishly complains to Watson. Holmes's complaint reflects a persistent metatextual concern in detective fiction: the anxiety that generic purity is unattainable; that the supposedly rational genre in which the supposedly rational Holmes feels at home is everywhere contaminated by the supernatural, occult, or irrational; that the epistemological principles and investigative procedures that define detective fiction's characteristic modality are deeply implicated in what the genre insists on condescendingly treating as "rubbish" and "pure lunacy."

"The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" foreshadows how this book will end: with a look at the "switch," to use Holmes's word, between ghost and detective fiction – or their hybridization, as I want to represent it. While literary genres are always impure, this particular hybridization occurs prominently toward the end of the nineteenth and in the early decades of the twentieth century, and Doyle's vampire/detective story, published in 1924, is a convenient bookend to the historical itinerary I will chart out. More importantly, Doyle's story, with its foregrounded tension between faith in and skepticism about the evidence of one's eyes, its conflicted endorsement and dismissal of the notion that seeing is believing, corroborates Kate Flint's remark that "though the visual was … of paramount importance to the Victorians, it was a heavily problematized category."[2] My contribution to our understanding of this problematic category will be to examine the ways in which ghost and detective fiction are structured by and in conversation with contemporary philosophical and scientific work on visual perception – what these genres have to tell us about Victorian theories of vision, and how these theories are represented in literature and

help shape its form and content. At times I contend that there are direct lines of influence to be traced between science and literature, as in the case of physiological optics and ghost fiction. In other places I make no such claims, and instead position philosophico-scientific and literary texts side by side to examine how different forms of discourse address the same issue, as in the shared concern of Victorian epistemologists and detective fiction writers with problems of inference and interpretation.

I contend throughout that ghost and detective fiction either implicitly or explicitly articulate the notion that vision, bluntly put, is a messy affair – that "[t]he facts of vision," as William James remarked, "form a jungle of intricacy."[3] Indeed, what exactly the facts *are* is precisely the issue. Is the "seat" of vision in the eye or in the mind? How do optical illusions work? What is the difference between sensation and perception? Are we hard-wired, as it were, to see things in a particular way or is seeing a matter of contingent experience, practice, and habit? And are there modes of perception not encompassed by the five bodily senses? Can we train ourselves to see in four dimensions? The answers to these and related questions, as we shall see, depend on whom we ask.

I open Part I by considering some of the ways in which we can (or ought to) read Victorian ghost fiction, and the interpretive challenges presented by this genre, especially to historicist readings. I then propose that nineteenth-century debates on ghost-seeing enable us to approach contemporary ghost stories from a contextualist perspective. Popular ghost-debunking works such as Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) and David Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832) argued that ghost sightings can effectively be explained in physiological terms, namely as optical illusions. The organ of sight, Scott and Brewster claimed, often deceives us about the shape, nature, and even existence of perceived objects. Ghosts are exemplars of things that look real enough but exist only in the deceived or diseased eye of the beholder. The optical theory exerted a formative influence on the nineteenth-century ghost story. Scott's own ghost story "The Tapestried Chamber" (1828) inaugurates the trend of drawing upon the optical explanation to undermine the notion that seeing ghosts is believing in ghosts. Yet the ghost's unique ontology places it in a distinct class of perceived objects. What is at stake in believing one's eyes where apparitions are concerned is not just the obvious issue of the reliability of sight (under spectral or any other circumstances), but also emotionally loaded concerns about death and the afterlife. Scott's *Letters* are dismissive of ghost sightings and so-called "authentic" ghost

stories, yet his own ghost story does not unequivocally dismiss the ghost as an illusion. Rather, "The Tapestried Chamber" exemplifies a consistent feature of the genre: it leaves this question unresolved.

But what *kind* of seeing are we talking about? A broader perspective of nineteenth-century visual culture (though, of course, not broad enough to encompass this culture in its entirety) suggests that the Victorians understood sight as physiological, corporeal, retinal – and as something more than that: something else entirely. Thomas Carlyle's and John Ruskin's protests against the impact of scientific materialism on the culture at large often involved advocating a different way of seeing, and a different way of thinking about seeing – what Carlyle calls "inward eyesight"[4] and Ruskin terms "the soul of the eye."[5] Victorian spiritualists shared this impatience with mechanistic models of the observer. If one hopes to see a ghost, or the inhabitant of a higher plane of existence, many spiritualists and psychic researchers argued, one must rely on the inner, intuitive, spiritual eye rather than the limited corporeal organ. Yet the perceptual alternatives provided by a burgeoning discourse on the interior senses, sight in particular, are largely absent from Victorian ghost stories. I conclude Part I by proposing that the reasons for this absence have to do with the genre's unique aesthetic considerations and its positivist preference for the evidence of the bodily senses over other kinds of perception and proof.

In Part II I show how problems of visual perception proved to be more complicated than Scott and Brewster had assumed. Physiological descriptions of vision, it came to be argued, failed to address another, more critical, set of issues and concerns. As Thomas Reid had already observed in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), the "common error of the philosophers, to account the senses fallacious," arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of the perceptual process. The senses, Reid explained, are merely passive conduits of sense data. As such they are neither deceptive nor truthful: "If they are not judging faculties, no judgment can be imputed to them, whether false or true."[6] Errors do occur, of course, but they are results of incorrect inferences rather than of physiological malfunctions. Ghosts, George Henry Lewes argued, are not optical illusions but products of erroneous inferences: "[W]hen a man avers that he has 'seen a ghost,' he is passing far beyond the limits of visible facts, into that of inference. He saw *something* which he *supposed* to be a ghost."[7]

This conceptualizing of vision in inferential terms, popular among Victorian epistemologists from the 1840s on, can be traced back to George Berkeley's *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), where the observer is imagined as a reader and interpreter. "[V]isible objects are

only in the mind," Berkeley declares, and do not "suggest ought external, whether distance or magnitude, otherwise than by habitual connexion as words do things."[8] Berkeley's theory anticipates Ferdinand de Saussure's claim that the relation between a signifier and its signified is arbitrary, a matter of "habitual connexion" rather than innate correspondence. In Berkeley's theory the epistemological ramifications of this arbitrariness are held in check by religious convictions: "[T]he voice of the Author of Nature, which speaks to our eyes, is not liable to that misinterpretation and ambiguity that languages of human contrivance are unavoidably subject to."[9] When his empirico-associationist theory of vision is appropriated by Victorian epistemologists, it is largely stripped of its religious underpinnings. The secularization of Berkeley's theory is part of the push in contemporary scientific naturalism and Comtean positivism to expel all traces of metaphysics and intuitionism from the philosophy of science. Yet proponents of these epistemologies conceded, sometimes implicitly and at other times openly, that restructuring the seeing-is-reading model in this fashion raises the worrisome specters of relativism and subjectivism. With the "voice of the Author of Nature" muted, the observer is bereft of divine guidance in reading the world-text. Making inferences is the only way to understand this text, but it is also the path to misreadings and misinterpretations.

These developments were conterminous with the rise of detective fiction, and the seeing-is-reading paradigm is central to the construction of the fictional detective as an adroit reader of clues and codes. In the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the detective is a master-semiotician, an expert interpreter of a textualized visual world. At the same time all three writers recoil from the relativism that seems inextricable from the secularized linguistic model. They counter the interpretive uncertainties that inhere in this model by retaining the element of certitude in Berkeley's conceptualization of the observer, or by extolling ratiocinative procedures that isolate the work of detection from the ambiguous text of the sensuous world. In an uneasy and complicated dialectic of faith and skepticism in the observer's readerly inferences, detective fiction writers both privilege vision in the work of detection and use various strategies of containment to prevent it from compromising the genre's commitment to the discovery of truth.

While the rationalist protocols of nineteenth-century detective fiction ostensibly preclude non-rational forms of knowledge and, even more so, supernatural occurrences, the genre consistently displays signs of affinity with clairvoyance and telepathy, intuitionism and spiritualism. Doyle is

anxious to distinguish Holmes's ratiocinative genius from intuition – the detective's "rapid deductions [are] as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis"[10] – precisely because the two have so much in common. If one of Collins's characters in *The Moonstone* must insist that "[w]e have nothing whatever to do with clairvoyance, or with mesmerism, or with anything else that is hard of belief to a practical man, in the inquiry that we are now pursuing" (*M*, p. 332), this is because the genre in which this pronouncement is made is contaminated at its source: it is everywhere haunted by what it attempts – and fails – to repress.

Part III opens with a reading of Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–2), in which Holmes's investigative procedures suspiciously resemble the practices of spiritualist mediums. Holmes even confesses at one point that he is ready to be "convert[ed] … to the doctrine of reincarnation" (*HB*, p. 121). *The Hound*'s merger of epistemes reflects a larger epistemological and ontological restructuring in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. I follow the progress of this restructuring in vision-related developments in physics, optics, and mathematics, specifically the momentous shift from the particle (corpuscular) to the wave (undulatory) theory of light, and the rise and popularization of non-Euclidean and *n*-dimensional geometries. The wave theory of light resuscitated previous speculations on the ether, and proved immensely useful in constructing scientifically buttressed claims for the existence of invisible spirits and higher intelligences. That the omnipresent, all-permeating ether was not available to direct observation and measurement was a point which spiritualists used to their advantage: seeing (or hearing or touching) is not a prerequisite for believing. If the ether is real, and if it channels light and other kinds of wave, who is to say that it does not also mediate occult communications? As the sciences extended their reach into the invisible world by means of bold hypotheses, they inadvertently encouraged, and even seemed to lend credibility to, spiritualist projects that stressed the intellectual myopia of materialism and the need to reconceptualize the relationship between the natural and the supernatural realms. If space has more than three dimensions, and if spirits exist on some higher spatio-ontological plane, then the extra dimension must be their natural abode – an extension of the three-dimensional space and natural world known to us through our five senses. But are we constitutionally forever barred from other kinds of sensation and perception? The idea that there are more than five senses, and that the most important sense is precisely the one that has been neglected, is a common feature of spiritualist literature throughout the Victorian era. It is voiced most forcefully in the closing decades of the century, when it

serves to bring science and spiritualism into conversation with each other. For instance, in Charles William Wooldridge's *The Missing Sense, and the Hidden Things Which It Might Reveal* (1887), the sixth sense, which Wooldridge maintains is closest to our sense of sight, facilitates the construction of "a rationalist's faith" that closes the gap traditionally dividing "two great schools, materialists and spiritualists."[11]

I conclude with a look at occult detective fiction, an unfairly neglected sub-genre which owes much to the late-Victorian fascination with the ether and the new geometries. Originating in the 1870s in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's stories featuring the metaphysical physician Martin Hesselius, occult detection operates on the boundary between the natural and the supernatural worlds – and questions the separation of the two. Occult detectives blend ratiocination with intuition, corporeal-sense observation with clairvoyance and telepathy, and effect a reconciliation of metaphysical and materialist paradigms, and also foreground the affinities between two ostensibly divergent and antagonistic literary genres: ghost and detective fiction.

Before I move on I shall give away the ending – two endings, actually. First, the ending of this book. In the Coda I confess to having omitted or suppressed something important: the other senses. How would I have read the same ghost and detective stories, for instance, or the same scientific and philosophical texts, had I been thinking about hearing (or touching or tasting or smelling) instead of seeing? How much did my reading for vision contribute to my blindness to other kinds of reading? As for "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire," Holmes is right. Seeing is not believing. Mrs. Ferguson is not a vampire. Her husband's nine-year-old son from a previous marriage, jealous of his father's affection for the infant, had been poisoning his sibling, and the mother had sucked not blood but poison from the baby's neck. Wishing to spare her husband the painful truth about his murderous son, the "vampire" had taken the blame on herself. What looked like an act of cruelty and perversion was actually an act of devotion and sacrifice. As Holmes had predicted, the "agency stands flat-footed upon the ground." At least for the time being.

PART I

Outer vision, inner vision: ghost-seeing and ghost stories

CHAPTER 1

Contextualizing the ghost story

Despite the immense popularity of ghost stories in the nineteenth century, evidenced by their pervasiveness in the most widely circulating periodicals of the time, it appears that we are as unlikely to see new critical assessments of the genre as we are to see an actual ghost. Although the ghost story, as Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert remind us, was "as typically part of the cultural and literary fabric of the age as imperial confidence or the novel of social realism,"[1] Nina Auerbach is right to observe that, while anthologies such as Cox and Gilbert's *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* are abundant, "serious scholarship on ghosts in fiction and film is … surprisingly sparse."[2] This lack of attention is no doubt due in part to the preference among literary scholars for realist fiction, which is to say the sort of writing that embraces the mandate to grapple with pressing social, economic, and political issues, and is committed, in George Eliot's memorable words, to "the faithful representing of commonplace things" instead of "things as they never have been and never will be."[3] Compared to realism's ambitious social-reformist agenda, its imperative to address and (as much as it is in literature's power) to redress the wrongs suffered by "real breathing men and women,"[4] narratives dealing with ghosts, fairies, or incubi can come off as a form of unconscionable escapism, an irresponsible flight from what is real and what really matters. By twisting reality out of shape and often insinuating the existence of a happier Elsewhere, tales of the supernatural are, in Marxist terms, a dangerous opiate that dulls critical thinking about the Here and Now.[5] Contrasting fantasy and realism, Terry Eagleton argues that fantasy "is at root a wayward individualism which insists on carving up the world as it pleases. It refuses to acknowledge what realism insists upon most: the recalcitrance of reality to our desires, the sheer stubborn inertia with which it baffles our designs upon it. Anti-realists are those who cannot get outside their own heads. It is a sort of moral astigmatism."[6] The natural outcome of such judgmental assessments is