Transformations of the Gothic in Victorian Ghost Stories

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Thesis abstract

This thesis will focus on the ways in which the transformations in nineteenth-century Gothic stories mirror the gradual changes in the Victorian society’s notions about perception and about the metaphysical. The nineteenth century marks a time when advances in science made it clear that not seeing something does not mean that it does not exist, and when psychologists made it clear that seeing something does not necessarily mean it does exist. Moreover, the nineteenth century was a time when religious notions that were previously accepted without question started to be doubted. When people lost their faith in the unseen and at the same time became aware that their eyes are not sufficient to see everything and that their mind may play tricks on them, the notion of reality was increasingly problematized, which is made especially clear in the genre of the Gothic.

It could be argued that while the basic tropes of the Gothic remain more or less the same; however, the way they are used, the reactions of the protagonists as well as the general outlook of the story are problematized by newly introduced ideas about vision and human mind. It could be said that in many cases there is no longer a clear boundary between the protagonist and the ‘other’ of the story, which can often be interpreted as an aspect of the protagonist himself, a part of his mind that comes to haunt him. Therefore in many stories the main protagonist may not be the innocent victim and the ‘other’ is not necessarily an outside threat but rather the evil within the character of the protagonist himself. Moreover, the confusion of the protagonists who witness something supernatural reflects the conflict between the dominant Victorian notions of “seeing is believing”\(^1\) on the one hand and the concept of the “fundamentally

subjective character of human vision”\(^2\) on the other. The social and cultural context is thus reflected not only in the depiction and role of the ghost, but, perhaps most importantly, in the behaviour of the character who encounters it. It is therefore worth considering that the main conflict of the story may no longer be between objectively perceived supernatural evil and the characters, but rather between warring notions about vision and reality in the mind itself, the uncertainty of how to react often resulting in characters’ attempts to incorporate the unexplainable and the supernatural into the well-known rational framework of medicine or psychology.

\(^2\) Smajic, 1110.
Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je určit jakým způsobem proměny gotického žánru v devatenáctém století odrážejí postupné změny, kterými ve viktoriánské společnosti prošly koncepty zrakového vnímání a nadpřirozena. Devatenácté století je dobou, kdy vědecký pokrok jasně dokázal, že existují věci pouhým okem neviditelné, a kdy nově se rozvíjející psychologie poukázala na to, že ne všechno, co lidé vidí, opravdu existuje. Bylo také dobou, kdy se začaly vynořovat pochybnosti o náboženských dogmatech, která se dříve jevila jako neotřesitelná. Lidé postupně ztráceli neochvějnou víru v neviditelné a zároveň si začali uvědomovat, že zrak je jako nástroj poznání nedostačující, a že mysl může ošálit smysly. V důsledku všech těchto vývojů se přímočarý koncept reality a reálného zkomplikoval, a tyto komplikace jsou především obsažené v literárním žánru, který se vyvinul z gotického románu, konkrétně ve viktoriánských duchařských povídkách.

Základní tropy gotického žánru v těchto povídkách zůstávají, změna spočívá v jejich použití, v reakcích protagonistů a v hlavním konfliktu povídek, který je určen novými poznatky o zraku a lidské mysli. V mnoha případech mizí jasné vymezení mezi hrdinou příběhu a antagonistou, který se často dá chápat jako součást hrdinovy mysli, která na sebe bere viditelnou podobu. V mnoha případech hrdina příběhu není nevinná oběť a jeho protivníkem není nutně nějaká hrozba zvenčí, ale zlo, strach, nebo pochyby, které se skrývají v něm samotném. Konflikt mezi hrdinou a jeho protivníkem je nahrazen vnitřním konfliktém a zmatením postavy, která je svědkem něčeho potencionálně nadpřirozeného. Tento konflikt je založen na dvou protikladných konceptech, které byly oba ve viktoriánské době běžné. První z nich je shrnutý ve rčení „vidět znamená vědět;“ zatímco ten druhý je obsažen v objevech, které potvrzují v zásadě subjektivní povahu lidského zraku. Společenský kontext se tak neodráží pouze ve vyobrazení a roli nadpřirozena, ale, možná nejmarkantněji, v chování člověka, který
je nadpřirozenem konfrontován. Moje teze tedy zní, že hlavní konflikt ve viktoriánských duchařských povídkách už není mezi postavami a objektivně vnímaným nadpřirozeným zlem, ale mezi konfliktními pojetími zrakového vnímání a reality v mysli protagonisty, který váhá nad tím, zda vůbec něco viděl a snaží se na svou percepci v zájmu vlastního klidu naroubovat některý z medicinských, či psychologických konceptů, které důvěrně zná; a že tato inovace oproti gotickému žánru odráží strachy a pochybnosti způsobené novými poznatky a myšlenkovými směry, které se objevily ve viktoriánské době.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Victorian approaches to the question of ghosts

In Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea”, Dr Hesselius gives a final comment on the case of Mr Jennings, who was found dead in his apartment after a prolonged period during which he was harassed by a ghost in the form of a little black monkey. The physician has not the slightest doubt about the origin of the ghost:

Every intelligent physician who will give thought and diligence to the task, will effect a cure. You know my tract on “The Cardinal Functions of the Brain.” I there, by the evidence of innumerable facts, prove, as I think, the high probability of a circulation arterial and venous in its mechanism, through the nerves. Of this system, thus considered, the brain is the heart. The fluid, which is propagated hence through one class of nerves, returns in an altered state through another, and the nature of that fluid is spiritual, though not immaterial, any more than, as I before remarked, light or electricity are so.¹

This attitude is reminiscent of many actual doctors, scientists and writers who were preoccupied with supernatural phenomena. The advances of medicine and psychology permitted the investigators to reasonably explain a ghost as a symptom of a disease, or else an interesting optical phenomenon. John Ferriar in his An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions (1813) ironically comments on the benefits of his medical explanation of ghosts as products of the eye: “Now I freely offer, to the manufacturers of ghosts, the privilege of raising them, in a great numbers, and in as horrible a guise as they may think fit, without offending against true philosophy, and even without violating probability.”² He calls the apparitions “a mere delusion,

a deceptio visus, arising from a temporary disordered state of the animal functions, wholly independent of the persons or bodies those figures represent.” Sir Walter Scott, in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) makes the following assertion:

> there can, we think, be little doubt of the proposition, that the external organs may, from various causes, become so much deranged as to make false representations to the mind; and that, in such cases, men, in the literal sense, really see the empty and false forms and hear the ideal – sounds which, in a more primitive state of society, are naturally enough referred to the action of demons or disembodied spirits.

Postulating the possibility of the physical organs being out of order while the mind is clear, both Ferriar and Scott put the appearance of ghosts purely into the realm of the physical. This is important since the physical aspects were much easier to examine and describe than the mental ones. However, this opinion was not accepted by all. There were respected scientists, such as William Crookes and Alfred Russel Wallace, who conducted serious enquiries into the nature of the soul and spiritual apparitions, and who instead of debunking the claims of spiritualism, eventually became convinced of the existence of such phenomena. Crookes, although he vigorously worked on revealing many spiritual mediums as frauds, also attempted to include spiritual phenomena into scientific research and to find a connection between mind and matter. In his 1874 book *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, Crookes says: “I shall state simply what I have seen and proved by repeated experiments and tests, and I have yet to learn that it is irrational to endeavour to discover the causes of unexplained phenomena.”

He makes it clear that his treatment of spiritual phenomena is a scientific one, based on experiments and observation, making it difficult to dismiss his findings as mere delusions. Sherie Lynne Lyons sums up Crookes’s position, saying “[He] thought that telepathy operated

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3 Ferriar, 42-43.
according to some fundamental law, just like gravity and electromagnetism. Perhaps the recently discovered roentgen, or X-rays, might be involved in the transmission of telepathic messages.”\(^6\) Similarly, Sir Alfred Russel Wallace, known as one of the minds behind the theory of natural selection, came to firmly believe in the existence of spiritual phenomena. In 1874, *Fortnightly Review* published his lengthy essay entitled “A Defence of Modern Spiritualism.” In it, he insists that spiritual phenomena are a new area for science to explore and define, formulating the assertions of spiritualism in the following way:

1. Man is a duality, consisting of an organized spiritual form, evolved coincidently with and permeating the physical body, and having corresponding organs and developments. 2. Death is the separation of this duality, and effects no change in the spirit, morally or intellectually. 3. Progressive evolution of the Intellectual and moral nature is the destiny of Individuals; the knowledge, attainments and experience of earth-life forming the basis of spirit-life. 4. Spirits can communicate through properly-endowed mediums.\(^7\)

Wallace was convinced that the mind evolves over time, just as the body does, and that this process continues after death. This presented an acceptable alternative to religion, in which the soul remains immortal, but instead of meeting its Maker after the death of the body, it continues to evolve to greater perfection through something highly valued by the Victorians – self-improvement. Thus, similarly as in ghost stories themselves, the opinions on ghosts ranged from their dismissal as symptoms of treatable diseases, to attempts to prove them to be impositions, to the examination of ghosts as scientific phenomena comparable to other forces such as magnetism and electricity. What all of these diverse explanations have in common is the refusal to accept the impossibility of knowing, and the attempt to dispel doubt that could lead to inaction. In this regard, Victorian ghost stories seem to be an accurate representation of

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Victorian mentality, while subtly undermining it, since in the stories there is always a possibility that the ghost is real and cannot be integrated into the familiar structure of Victorian existence.

1.2 Theoretical background

The aim of this thesis is to consider selected Victorian ghost stories in the light of concepts about knowledge and perception that were prevalent in Victorian society. The ghost story genre is taken to include short stories where an occurrence that can be considered supernatural is central to the plot, excluding stories dealing with vampires as those are a separate topic for further discussion. The theoretical basis of the argument will be Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of the genre of the fantastic. He maintains that hesitation of the character, and less crucially of the reader, is the primary condition of the fantastic:

Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic. In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. 8

It could be argued that in Victorian fantastic literature this whole concept is complicated by the fact that at the time it was produced, the laws of nature and perception were being rewritten by new discoveries that caused hesitation comparable to that in the case the of supernatural in the stories, but at the same time were widely accepted and impossible to ignore. This hesitation was further exacerbated because the Victorians still believed that there was a correct answer to each question posed and that the truth about any given thing was possible to discover. Walter E.

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Houghton points out that “The Victorians might be, and often were, uncertain about what theory to accept or what faculty of the mind to rely on; but it never occurred to them to doubt their capacity to arrive at truth.” This frame of mind fostered a very unique reaction to the supernatural. Instead of denying its existence or accepting that the world works differently than they thought, the Victorians treated it as a new scientific hypothesis that was to be empirically tested. They then attempted to incorporate it into the existing framework of medicine, physics or the bourgeoning field of psychology. Since Todorov’s moment of hesitation is to some extent mirrored in the Victorian situation, it follows that the ghost stories are useful for understanding some aspects of Victorian mentality, and as such are a unique genre in which the issues of perception, observable truth and the difficulty of accepting novel concepts or thoughts come to light.

Todorov argues that there are two major groups of themes discussed in fantastic literature. The first, which he terms “themes connected to the ‘I,’” subsumes all themes connected to perception. The second one, “themes connected to the ‘you,’” groups themes connected to sexual desire, especially its unusual forms such as perversions. It is very telling that in Victorian ghost stories the first set of themes is very prominently represented, while the second one seems to be left out almost entirely. Dani Cavallaro argues that “narratives of darkness evoke a universe of taboos in which the non-things which culture represses are brought to the foreground. In pulling to the surface occluded realms, those stories demonstrate that fantasy is not outside social reality but actually a constellation of social reality in inverted form.” If this is indeed the case, it would suggest that the problems Victorian society was immediately concerned with and that found its way into the Gothic fiction, were those connected with perception more than anything else. This line of reasoning is adopted by Srdjan Smajic, whose

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10 Todorov, 103; 118.
works deal with the concept of vision in Victorian culture and literature, tracing it across the genre of ghost stories and detective stories in his 2003 article “The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story” and later in his 2010 book Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science. The concern with knowledge and perception is understandable in the Victorians, who lived in an age when “each advance in knowledge, every new theory, raises fresh difficulties; the entrenched position to which one retreats today is under threatening attack tomorrow.”

Houghton convincingly describes the warring tendencies of the “critical spirit” and the “will to believe,” which would often lead to the paralysis of indecision, echoing Todorov’s hesitation. In his essay “Characteristics,” published in the December 1831 edition of the Edinburgh Review, Thomas Carlyle describes this state of mind in the following fashion:

Once upon a time action was easy, was voluntary for the divine worth of human things lay acknowledged. Now doubt storms in through every avenue; inquiries of the deepest, painfulest sort must be engaged with; and the invincible energy of young years waste itself in sceptical, suicidal cavillings; in passionate ‘questionings of Destiny,’ whereto no answer will be returned.

This kind of inability to act seems to define many of the characters that witness something inexplicable. The main action of the Victorian ghost story consists in the characters gathering information, getting second opinions (often from medical doctors or church officials) and trying to arrive at a resolution as to the nature of the previously unknown phenomena. It is therefore worth considering that the main conflict of the story may no longer be between objectively perceived supernatural evil and the characters, but rather between warring notions about vision

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12 Houghton, 67.
13 Houghton, 94.
14 Houghton, 94.
and reality in the mind itself. This is evidenced by the fact that the ghosts in the stories do not actively harm the protagonists, and that in case there is injury, it is usually incurred by the character himself due to the hesitation or fear caused by the apparition. This is the case with Reverend Jennings’ suicide in Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” (1869), the captain’s freezing to death in his chase after the apparition in Doyle’s “The Captain of the Pole-Star” (1883), the signal-man’s search for the ghost, which leads to a fatal accident in Dickens’s “The Signal-Man” (1866) and, perhaps least ambiguously, the sum of what happens to the narrator in Wells’s “The Red Room” (1896).

The uncertainty of how to react often results in the practical decision to incorporate the unexplainable and the supernatural into the well-known rational framework of medicine or psychology. The protagonist is hesitating and doubting his perception, stunned into inaction until he is finally able to come down on one side of the argument and make some sort of a conclusion. These conclusions are further complicated by the fact that there is often space for doubt left to the reader, while the character makes a decision even at the cost of ignoring other possibilities, in compliance with Horatio Brown’s idea that “it does not much matter what a man believes; but for power and happiness he must believe something – he must have his foot ‘tenoned and morticed’ somewhere, not planted on forever shifting sand heap.”\(^\text{16}\) Ghost stories and the fantastic genre in general therefore seem to be well suited for discussing the problems of perception and doubt, and to deal with the anxieties about them that the Victorian situation brought on.

1.3 Outline of the discussion

The second chapter will discuss the ways in which the problem of subjectivity of perception is dramatized in the characters’ experiences with the supernatural or the inexplicable. Observation

was one of the key scientific principles current in the Victorian age, showing the belief that reality can be ascertained by vision was still very strong. Inventions such as the microscope that later came to destabilize this notion were at this point doubted in a manner not dissimilar to the supernatural. On the other hand, people were also becoming aware of the workings of the human mind, and psychology was beginning to gain prominence, offering long lists of things that could influence one’s subjective perception. Things like the power of the surroundings, the darkness and one’s own nervousness were agreed to have the potential of manipulating sensory perception. Therefore, the characters in ghost stories are presented with at least three possible ways of explaining their experience – as a natural phenomenon that can be scientifically observed, as a trick of the mind that can be explained in psychological terms or as an actual supernatural occurrence. This chapter will discuss the ways in which the ghost stories establish the hesitation, using the concepts connected to vision that were current in the Victorian age.

The third chapter will focus on the paralysis that stems from this hesitation. The inability to act could be seen as the result of two different approaches that seem to be symptomatic of Victorian behaviour. The first is “the critical spirit”\textsuperscript{17} which drives the person to constantly question every assumption, trying to gather evidence and to arrive at an undoubtedly true conclusion. William Hurrell Mallock wrote in 1880: “We admit nothing now without question; we have learned to take to pieces all motives to actions. We not only know more than we have done before, but we are perpetually chewing the cud of our knowledge.”\textsuperscript{18} This approach, however, was a dangerous one in an age where new concepts and premises to be examined were constantly coming to light, leading to a constant need for re-evaluation: “One finds himself caught in a maze of

\textsuperscript{17} Houghton, 94.
introspection; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced.” The second tendency runs
the exact opposite way. Houghton argues that

what specially distinguished the Victorian was “his insistent attitude of acceptance, his
persistent belief in (but only rare examination of) the credentials of authority, his innate
desire to affirm and conform rather than to reject or to question.” The truth is that, to a
large extent, the will to believe overrode the desire to question, and private judgement
was renounced, both deliberately and unconsciously, for external authority.

This character trait accounts for the reluctance to accept anything that would upset the set of
laws and principles currently held as valid. It fosters the type of hesitation that tries to find any
explanation that would conform to what is considered possible, regardless of how improbable
it is, and consciously disregards solutions that would necessarily have to lead to reconsidering
the status quo. The hesitation is exacerbated by the fact that inaction was hateful to most
Victorians, who valued things for their practical purpose, and people for their contribution to
the society. John Stuart Mill praised England in these words: “In intellect she is distinguished
only for a kind of sober good sense…and for doing all those things which are best done where
man most resembles a machine, with the precision of a machine.”

Houghton comments that

“in minds so constituted, and in lives so immersed in business, what counts is tangible results
– profits, larger plants or firms, personal advancement, professional or social. The test of value,
including that of thought, becomes utility in the narrow sense.” To be irresolute and inactive
is the worst thing a man can do. Therefore, the characters attempt to dispel the hesitation, to
choose a course of action and pursue it, which generally leads to one of two extremes – either
they pursue to their own detriment the examination of something that would better be ignored.

19 Houghton, 72.
20 Houghton, 94.
21 John Stuart Mill, Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical and Historical Vol.1 (London: J. W.
Parker, 1875) 96.
22 Houghton, 111.
or they resolve to carry on with their actions despite the information they are given. This is comparable to what was happening in Victorian society itself, when people were trying to deal with new scientific theories and discoveries that were threatening to upend their understanding of the world. An example of the first extreme would be the attempts to scientifically describe the nature of the soul and the afterlife in a refusal to admit that they are unknowable. The second approach is exemplified, for example, in the resistance of medical men toward new, better methods of curing their patients, ignoring advances in microbiology and instead prescribing purgation or a change of air.

The fourth chapter will deal with the figure of the ghost and how it is depicted in the stories. Descriptions of the ghosts and what is and is not actually seen of them will be discussed in the light of the above-mentioned features of the Victorian mentality. This chapter will examine the question of whether it is really the form of the ghost and what it does that inspires fear in the stories or whether it is rather the fact that the characters are faced with an occurrence that is inexplicable to them and that causes them to question their own judgement, health and beliefs. Houghton argues that the Victorians were “terribly exposed to a constant succession of shattering developments… Always a fresh assault makes the last defence obsolete and raises again the ghost of doubt which one thought – or hoped – he had laid.”

In this sense it would be only logical if the ghost in the Victorian ghost stories was in fact the existence of something that threatens one’s established worldview with doubts and uncertainty. Another problem is the fact that even if the protagonist accepts the existence of the ghost, the apparition itself does not communicate its purpose clearly and often remains an unreadable sign, subverting the notion that visits from the afterlife are made with a message to the living.

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23 Houghton, 67.
The last chapter will discuss the conclusions of the stories. Many of the stories leave the reader with room for hesitation even though the characters have by the end almost invariably made up their own minds about the occurrence (albeit in some cases at the cost of ignoring some facts or forcing themselves to accept an imperfect solution). This chapter will also discuss the question of whether the endings are cathartic for the reader, in that the characters take a stand on what they witnessed, or whether the reader is left with an uncomfortable sense that the characters’ solution does not account for everything. The different endings will also be considered in the light of different aspects of the Victorian frame of mind and of Todorov’s idea that the fantastic, when the hesitation has ceased, shades either into “the uncanny (the supernatural explained) or “the marvellous” (the supernatural accepted).”

The stories discussed will include Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” and “Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street”, H. G. Wells’s “The Red Room”, Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door,” Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Captain of the Pole-Star”, Amelia B. Edwards’s “The New Pass”, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s “The House and the Brain”, Charles Dickens’s “The Signal-Man” and “To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt” and Lanoe Falconer’s “Cecilia de Noël.” These will also be compared to some of the non-fiction works produced on the topic of ghosts and the allegedly true ghost stories that are presented in them as evidence.

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24 Todorov, 41-42.
Chapter 2: The Role of Light and Vision in Establishing the Moment of Hesitation

2.1 Victorian theories of vision and visibility

“There is nothing like light,”¹ scoffs Doctor Simpson, when he comes to investigate the supposed ghost in Margaret Oliphant’s story “The Open Door,” equipped with his own light source. This implies the belief that evidence presented by sight is accurate as long as the external conditions are favourable. The darkness hinders eyesight; however, if one is able to shine sufficient light on the scene and observe it long and closely enough, the truth can be ascertained, the doctor seems to be saying. What complicates this notion is the fact that the concepts of vision and visibility became much more complicated than this during the Victorian era. On the one hand, sight retained its importance as the primary means of knowing the world. Kate Flint states that “[in] popular scientific writing, whether oriented towards medical matters, or towards the importance of observing the natural world, the wonderful, miraculous properties of vision were endlessly stressed, by scientific specialists and journalistic generalists alike.”² The belief that knowledge can be gained through careful observation was still implicit in all areas of science. As David Brewster describes in his 1856 article “The Sight and How to See”:

> Of all the Five Senses – the sight, the hearing, the touch, the taste, and the smell, by which we acquire our knowledge of the external world, the form, the colour, and the other properties of matter, the sense of sight is the most important, whether we view it in reference to the extent of its range, the value of its lessons, or the structure of its organs.³

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¹ Margaret Oliphant, Two Stories of the Seen and the Unseen (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885): 55.
The reason he gives for the pre-eminence of sight is that while the other senses require direct contact with the examined object (as in the case of touch and taste), or at least its proximity (as with smell and hearing),

the eye carries us to the remotest horizon around, glances upward beyond the voiceless air, through the planetary regions where worlds are but stars, through the sidereal zones where suns are too small to be seen, and to that more distant bourne where Imagination droops her wings, and Reason ceases to be our guide. But even in these distant realms, where the intellectual eye becomes dim, the human eyeball exerts its powers – descrying and describing what is there…⁴

The idea that where reason fails, the eye can accurately show us the truth puts an immense confidence in the accuracy of the sense of sight. Brewster then goes on to assert that human civilization as we know it could exist and flourish without any of the other four senses; nonetheless, he seems to believe that sight is indispensable, and without it the world would be radically different. He describes the bleak vision of a world “where space is impervious to light, or man insensible to its impressions,” saying that “without any knowledge of the form or the size of his own world…man might subsist on the spontaneous productions of the soil…but his sustenance would have been more precarious than that of the world of instinct as now placed under his power.”⁵ For Brewster, sight is unequivocally the key to knowledge and understanding of the world, and he seems to be convinced that the eye is a mechanical instrument that always works the same way, in accordance with the circumstances.

However, this supposition was in his time being disproved by new theories about light, most notably Augustin Jean Fresnel’s undulatory or wave-motion theory of light. Jonathan Crary explains that “by 1821 Fresnel had concluded that the vibrations of which light consisted were

⁴ Brewster, 78.
⁵ Brewster, 79.
entirely transverse [instead of composed of rays that emanate rectilinearly]…As light began to be conceived as an electromagnetic phenomenon it had less and less to do with the realm of the visible and with the description of human vision.”⁶ This discovery was among many other new theories and experiments that gradually shifted the idea of vision from focus on the external conditions and the formulation of optical laws, to the investigation of the internal, bodily workings of the eye and to the figure of the observer. This process was already in motion for some time before the nineteenth century. George Berkeley, in his essay “Towards a New Theory of Vision”, published as early as 1709, already calls into question the neat assumption that we “see by geometry”⁷ and compute properties like distance and magnitude of objects using the “angles made by the meeting of the two optic axes” or “the greater or lesser divergency of the rays, which arrive from any point to the pupil.”⁸ Berkeley maintained that what the eye sees has no tangible reality, and that what we see merely evokes ideas about the distance and magnitude of the object that are based on previous experience. He insists that “there are two sorts of objects apprehended by sight; each whereof hath its distinct magnitude, or extension. The one, properly tangible, i.e. to be perceived and measured by touch, and not immediately falling under the sense of seeing: the other, properly and immediately visible, by mediation of which the former is brought in view.”⁹ The tangible object remains always the same, while the visible one changes as we approach it or recede from it. This means that the visible is ever changing and can be interpreted in different ways according to the experience of the observer, making vision subjective and ambiguous. Berkeley’s ideas were supported by subsequent developments in science which ceased to regard light as a set of rays emanating from a point under certain angles, hence disproving the notion that what we see is generated by mathematical equations. Vision was no longer viewed as an objective, mechanical phenomenon, but rather as a subjective

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⁸ Berkeley, 7.
⁹ Berkeley, 59.
experience of the observer. Attention was turned to the eye as a fallible and deceivable organ. Crary sums up the development:

vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, a science of vision will tend to mean increasingly an interrogation of the physical makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light and optical transmission.\(^{10}\)

The idea that the eye can be easily deceived lends credibility to the explanation of apparitions as optical illusions or products of a diseased vision. In his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* Sir Walter Scott treats apparitions as the product of a defect in the visual organs, comparable to colour blindness:

[It is] a disease of the visual organs, which present to the patient a set of spectres or appearances which have no actual existence. It is a disease of the same nature which renders many men incapable of distinguishing colours; only the patients go a step further, and pervert the external form of objects. In their case, therefore, contrary to that of the maniac, it is not the mind, or rather the imagination, which imposes upon and overpowers the evidence of the senses, but the sense of seeing (or hearing) which betrays its duty and conveys false ideas to a sane intellect.”\(^{11}\)

He stresses that this disease is usually temporary and can be either weathered out, or palliated by bloodletting, rest and so on. He also attaches it as a symptom to various diseases that are not connected to the eyes, such as “febrile and inflammatory disorders – frequently accompanying inflammation of the brain – a concomitant also of highly excited nervous irritability – equally connected with hypochondria – and finally united in some cases with gout.”\(^{12}\) This shows that

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\(^{10}\) Crary, 70.
\(^{11}\) Scott, 22.
\(^{12}\) Scott, 26.
not only is vision subjective and therefore influenced by the surroundings, but it is also closely tied to the state of the patient’s whole body.

Furthermore, the mind also plays an important role in perception, which informs the theory of apparitions by Dr Samuel Hibbert, who states that there is no doubt

that organs of sense are the actual medium through which past feelings are renovated; or that, when, from strong mental excitements, ideas have become more vivid than actual impressions, the intensity is induced by an absolute affection of those particular parts of the organic tissue on which sensations depend. 13

The idea is that the mind can recollect an image so strongly that it actually appears on the retina which means that it is not only the work of the imagination or a product of mental disease. All these theories are particularly conducive to hesitation on the part of the observer that cannot be dispersed by simply shining more light on the object, since the property of light to show the true colours and make up of an object comes to be doubted as well.

Another blow to the theories that light shows the truth and that vision objectively ascertains reality is Johannes Müller’s theory of specific nerve energies. Crary sums it up as an assertion that “a variety of different causes will produce the same sensation in a given sensory nerve. In other words, he is describing a fundamentally arbitrary relation between the stimulus and sensation.” 14 This means that the sensation of light, for example, can be effected by a number of different causes:

13 Dr Samuel Hibbert, Sketches of the philosophy of apparitions; or, An attempt to trace such illusions to their physical causes (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1825) 246.
14 Crary, 90.
1. By the undulations or emanations which from their action on the eye are called light, although they may have many other actions than this; for instance, they effect chemical changes, and are the means of maintaining the organic processes in plants.

2. By mechanical influences; as concussion or a blow.

3. By electricity.

4. By chemical agents, such as narcotics, digitalis, &c. which, being absorbed into the blood, give rise to the appearance of luminous sparks, &c. before the eyes independently of any external cause.

5. By the stimulus of the blood in a state of congestion.\(^{15}\)

This implies that the eye is not receptive solely of images of external reality as illuminated by light, but can be stimulated in many other ways; what the observer sees might in no shape or form exist in the external world. This leads to an epistemological conundrum. On the one hand, the eye is praised as the most perfect of sense organs, and observation seen as the surest way to knowledge. Most of the scientific advances and new inventions of the time have to do with eyesight – the telescope, x-rays, the microscope – therefore the new discoveries have been made by observing. On the other hand the very same scientific advances show all the ways in which the eye cannot be trusted, rendering all observation dubious.

To further complicate matters, another school of thought in the Victorian era stresses the importance of inner vision, or postulates the existence of a sixth sense. Catherine Crowe asserts in her book *Revelations of the Invisible World* (1847) that “persons whose life is in the brain – but especially those in whom it is more in the epigastric region – are occasionally capable of ghost-seeing; but the apparition is always seen by the spiritual eye through the fleshly.”\(^{16}\)


is similar to the idea of the sixth sense as defined by the author of the 1856 article “The Lost Faculty, or Sixth Sense” in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*:

This faculty, or sixth sense, consisted in the power of perceiving, by ‘the mind’s eye’ spiritual beings, with the same ordinary facility with which the ordinary eye perceives material substances. This mental vision we believe to have been an ordinary endowment of humanity in its original state of innocence…[It] was lost…being, however occasionally and temporarily restored or imparted to individuals, for special purposes.¹⁷

This definition might suggest supernatural or divine origin of this spiritual sight; nevertheless, the author of the article also states that “we have the firmest belief that it is effected by natural laws alone, although, from its unfrequency, its unearthly nature, and the horror it generally inspires, no attempts have been made hitherto to discover them. Perhaps the electric fluid may afford a clue to the mystery.”¹⁸ Even this seemingly mystical and sporadic faculty of inner sight is stressed to be the product of natural laws, and therefore divested of its miraculous nature.

Nevertheless, according to Catherine Crow, bodily sight becomes an obstacle when one attempts to employ spiritual vision, and the intellectual, rational approach complicates intuitive observation of the immaterial:

In ordinary waking persons, the cloud of our life of appearance interposes betwixt the fleshly and spiritual eye, and then they see nothing but material superficies. And when now and then a spiritual ray does pierce through the cloud of our intellectual life, it is only momentary; and our reason rejects and disputes the airy form of a departed soul that has presented itself to the spiritual eye.¹⁹

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¹⁸ “The Lost Faculty, or Sixth Sense,” 733.
¹⁹ Crowe, 165-66.
Consequently, the observer is faced with yet another dilemma – is the intellect to be carefully employed in judging the information presented by the fallible organ of sight, or thoroughly suspended in order to witness a spiritual revelation that must not be questioned, lest it should disappear? All the new, conflicting theories, along with the still ingrained belief in the epistemological value of sight contribute to a mind-set in which hesitation is nearly inevitable. When confronted with an extraordinary sight, the observer can attribute it to an optical illusion, a projection of his own mind, a symptom of a disease or nervous disorder, a result of other kinds of outer stimulation besides light (such as electricity), or to a vision presented by the inner sight – before even beginning to consider it a supernatural occurrence.

2.2 The pre-eminence of vision in knowing: “The Open Door”

Margaret Oliphant masterfully emphasizes the primacy of vision in the Victorian concept of knowledge – without once actually showing the ghost – in her story “The Open Door,” first published in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in January 1882. The central event of the story is a regular occurrence of strange sounds and voices near the ruins of an old house on the protagonist’s estate:

[It] was only in the months of November and December that "the visitation" occurred.

During these months, the darkest of the year, scarcely a night passed without the recurrence of these inexplicable cries. Nothing, it was said, had ever been seen, — at least, nothing that could be identified. Some people, bolder or more imaginative than the others, had seen the darkness moving…

The story is set up with hints at various explanations. The narrator’s son, who is the first to experience the unexplained voice, is described as a “pale-faced boy,” “fragile in body” and “deeply sensitive in mind,” which could point to his susceptibility to imagining things. The

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20 Oliphant, 30.
21 Oliphant, 4.
strange occurrences begin in the winter, when light is scarce: “It appeared that ever since the
winter began – since it was early dark, and night had fallen before his return from school – he
had been hearing voices among the ruins: at first only a groaning, he said, at which his pony
was as much alarmed as he was, but by degrees a voice.” 22 The dark night, the empty park and
the desolate ruins provide surroundings which could surely influence the boy’s perception, and
fear could gradually transform random sounds into a voice. Another explanation, adhered to by
Doctor Simmons, is the physical one: “As sane as – I – or you. I never thought the boy insane.
He's got cerebral excitement, fever.” 23 When the narrator arrives, the boy is bed-ridden and
indeed looks the part of a fever patient: “He was paler and more worn, I thought, than even in
those dreadful days in the plains before we left India. His hair seemed to me to have grown long
and lank; his eyes were like blazing lights projecting out of his white face.” 24 Yet another
plausible explanation is that of human agency. The narrator is aware that all of the servants
support the claim about the voice and avoid the ruins as much as they can, which makes him
suspicious: “It is impossible to fathom the minds of rustics; there might be some devilry of
practical joking, for anything I knew; or they might have some interest in getting up a bad
reputation for the Brentwood avenue.” 25 Last but not least, the father also admits the possibility
that his son might be endowed with a sensitivity to spiritual communication, although he is far
from viewing it as a privilege: “My blood got a sort of chill in my veins at the idea that Roland
should be a ghost-seer; for that generally means a hysterical temperament and weak health, and
all that men most hate and fear for their children.” 26 With all of these possibilities open, the
narrator takes it upon himself to personally investigate the ruins.

22 Oliphant, 15.
23 Oliphant, 51.
24 Oliphant, 16.
26 Oliphant, 23.
The primary objective is to see for himself; the first time he passes the ruins, however, the effect seems to be opposite – instead of him seeing, he has the feeling of being watched:

It was getting dark by the time I went out, and nobody who knows the country will need to be told how black is the darkness of a November night under high laurel-bushes and yew-trees. I walked into the heart of the shrubberies two or three times, not seeing a step before me, till I came out upon the broader carriage-road, where the trees opened a little, and there was a faint gray glimmer of sky visible, under which the great limes and elms stood darkling like ghosts; but it grew black again as I approached the corner where the ruins lay. Both eyes and ears were on the alert, as may be supposed; but I could see nothing in the absolute gloom, and, so far as I can recollect, I heard nothing. Nevertheless, there came a strong impression upon me that somebody was there. It is a sensation which most people have felt. I have seen when it has been strong enough to awake me out of sleep, the sense of someone looking at me. I suppose my imagination had been affected by Roland's story; and the mystery of the darkness is always full of suggestions.27

The psychological effect of the darkness is not only the inability to ascertain the true form of familiar objects, which consequently look like “ghosts”28 but also the feeling that something concealed may be watching him, and therefore gaining advantage. Seeing seems to mean being sure, knowing the situation, while darkness, as the narrator believes, “is full of suggestions”29 that only lead to conjecture, and affects him with anxiety even though at first, he neither sees nor hears anything out of the ordinary. Later he experiences, in the darkness, what he describes as “a perfectly soft, faint, inarticulate sigh.”30 This is enough for him to assert: “My scepticism disappeared like a mist. I was as firmly determined that there was something as Roland was. I did not for a moment pretend to myself that it was possible I could be deceived.”31 This certainty

27 Oliphant, 26.
28 Oliphant, 26.
29 Oliphant, 26.
30 Oliphant, 39.
31 Oliphant, 39.
is predicated upon the notion that there is something visible that the darkness conceals, but that can be seen. Consequently, the next visit to the ruins is meant to confirm the evidence of his ears with his eyes and to see, which seems equivalent to knowing, the night visitor. The narrator sets out, armed with a lantern and accompanied by a manservant, giving the order: “Keep your eyes open and your wits about you. Be ready to pounce upon any stranger you see – anything man or woman.”

Interestingly enough, the narrator does not include any other possible identity for the source of the sound than “man or woman,” showing himself remarkably narrow-minded. After hearing “a low, moaning, wailing voice,” he uncovers the lantern: “The light leaped out like something living, and made the place visible in a moment.” When the light fails to show anything in the doorway of the ruins, the narrator decides to go around, while his companion holds the light:

The light shook in Bagley’s hand, but, tremulous though it was, shone out through the vacant door, one oblong block of light marking all the crumbling corners and hanging masses of foliage. Was that something dark huddled in a heap by the side of it? I pushed forward across the light in the door-way, and fell upon it with my hands; but it was only a juniper-bush growing close against the wall.

The narrator is prepared to see a human shape somewhere, which leads him to interpret anything even remotely similar as a huddled figure. His companion is so distraught by the inability to see anything that he jumps at the first human figure he sees – which is his master, and the owner of the voice still remains unseen. The light is failing them, not revealing the truth, and the narrator cannot accept that: “I snatched the light out of his hand, and flashed it all about me wildly. Nothing – the juniper-bush which I thought I had never seen before, the heavy growth

32 Oliphant, 42.
33 Oliphant, 44.
34 Oliphant, 44.
35 Oliphant, 46.
of the glistening ivy, the brambles waving.”

Then he calls out to the voice “heart giving a leap of terror lest there should be a reply.”

This is what frightens him the most: “a creature invisible, yet with sensations, feelings, a power somehow of expressing itself.”

The invisibility is alarming, because it suggests that there is something that cannot be known, observed and described in a way that was customary for the science of the day. Additionally, it opens the possibility that the world as man knows it – through his sight – is not all there is, and that consequently the eyes are not a reliable means of acquiring knowledge.

The Doctor, when confronted with the story has a clear idea of the cause – anything but a ghost: “there's no accounting for the freaks our brains are subject to. If it's delusion, if it's some trick of the echoes or the winds – some phonetic disturbance or other…”

When invited to investigate for himself, he insists that “[the] thing has delusion on the front of it. It is encouraging an unwholesome tendency even to examine. What good could come of it? Even if I am convinced, I shouldn't believe.”

Eventually, he agrees to come, bringing “a coil of taper,” and insisting that “there is nothing like light.”

They use two sources of light this time, throwing the space behind the door “in a blaze of light in the midst of the blackness.”

The Doctor crosses into the space and seems to come across something:

"Do you see anybody?" I cried in a whisper, feeling the chill of nervous panic steal over me at this action.

"It's nothing but a – confounded juniper-bush," he said. This I knew very well to be nonsense, for the juniper-bush was on the other side.

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36 Oliphant, 47.
37 Oliphant, 49.
38 Oliphant, 40.
39 Oliphant, 52.
40 Oliphant, 52.
41 Oliphant, 55.
42 Oliphant, 55.
43 Oliphant, 57.
44 Oliphant, 58.
Again, the investigation yields nothing except an altercation about the position of the juniper bush: “‘didn't you notice that juniper-bush on the left-hand side?’ ‘There was one on the right hand of the door. I noticed you made that mistake last night.’” The situation becomes even more mysterious when the narrator goes to investigate in the daylight and finds that “right and left, there was no juniper at all!” This new mystery, while seemingly quite unrelated to a ghost, further invalidates the evidence of the eyes. Not only does sight not match the sound, but now the investigators are seeing things that later disappear without a trace. Nevertheless, this does not discourage the narrator from continuing to use the same method of detection – observation assisted by as much light as possible. Since this is the only path to certainty for the narrator, he does not take any other steps to deal with the ghost, and although at this point he is convinced that there is something supernatural, he keeps repeating the same experiment, because the only way to make progress is to see, and thus to know the origin of the sound.

The third and last attempt at revealing the source of the voice is made with three participants – one of them a doctor – one of them a parson, and with three sources of light. The doctor comes up with another theory that involves someone visible making the sound: “‘One thing is certain, you know; there must be some human agency,’ he said. ‘It is all bosh about apparitions. I never have investigated the laws of sound to any great extent, and there's a great deal in ventriloquism that we don't know much about.’” Once again an attempt is made to thoroughly light the scene of the voice in order to observe the cause: “Now with our three lights in the midst of the darkness, the whole place seemed illuminated.” The voice again repeats itself. The narrator reports:

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45 Oliphant, 61.
46 Oliphant, 66.
47 Oliphant, 69.
48 Oliphant, 70.
I declare that it seemed to me as if I were pushed against, put aside, by the owner of the voice as he paced up and down in his trouble, — though these are perfectly futile words, seeing that the stream of light from my lantern, and that from Simson's taper, lay broad and clear, without a shadow, without the smallest break, across the entire breadth of the grass.⁴⁹

The evidence of touch and hearing is not enough for the narrator to conclude that there is indeed a human figure there. Such a thing can apparently only be confirmed by the evidence of the eyes. What happens next is unprecedented. Where the bodily sight fails, apparently, the spiritual vision prevails. The parson appears to recognize the voice and addresses it, entering into a trance in which “he neither saw nor heard me.”⁵⁰ This is in keeping with the theories that the inner sight is only hindered by physical vision. The doctor and the narrator, despite being “spectators”⁵¹ never actually see anything, and later when the doctor asks the parson, “Then you saw the man?”⁵² he is met with silence and “a little impatient [hand] movement.”⁵³ The parson never reveals if he really saw the ghost, which means that the story is left without that which throughout was most sought after – a visual evidence. The sounds cease and the doctor is overjoyed when he later discovers, inside the ruins “more a hole than a room – entirely hidden under the ivy and ruins, in which there was a quantity of straw laid in a corner, as if someone had made a bed there, and some remains of crusts about the floor,”⁵⁴ which provides him with tangible (and what is more visible) evidence of a human presence. This he is prepared to trust, saying “I told you it was human agency.”⁵⁵ The narrator has only one argument at his disposal:

I can always bring back gravity to his countenance, and a pause in his railing, when I remind him of the juniper-bush. To me that was a matter of little importance. I could

⁴⁹ Oliphant, 70-71.
⁵⁰ Oliphant, 72.
⁵¹ Oliphant, 76.
⁵² Oliphant, 78.
⁵³ Oliphant, 78.
⁵⁴ Oliphant, 83.
⁵⁵ Oliphant, 83.
believe I was mistaken. I did not care about it one way or other; but on his mind the
effect was different. The miserable voice, the spirit in pain, he could think of as the
result of ventriloquism, or reverberation, or — anything you please: an elaborate
prolonged hoax, executed somehow by the tramp that had found a lodging in the old
tower; but the juniper-bush staggered him. Things have effects so different on the
minds of different men.”

It is symptomatic of the Victorian fascination with sight as a means to knowledge that the doctor
is more concerned with the juniper bush than with the possibility of afterlife. His reaction shows
how unsettling it is to him that he possibly cannot trust the evidence of his own eyes. He is
prepared to dismiss the “ghost” because he did not see it with his own eyes, notwithstanding
all the other kinds of evidence presented to him, but he is “staggered” by the fact that he saw
a piece of foliage that he later could not find. This shows how despite various theories about
the unreliability of sight, and their frequent use to debunk ghost stories, the trust in the accuracy
and truth-revealing capacity of the eye was still firmly embedded in the Victorian mind.

2.3 The unreliable sight in ghost stories: “An Account of Some Disturbances in
Aungier Street”

Ghost stories make ample use of the wide variety of explanations for ghosts, and further
destabilize the celebrated traits of scepticism and impartial observation by having unreliable
characters who are very much involved in the story and in no way unbiased observers. An
example of a ghost story that perfectly dramatizes the conflict of different theories about vision
is Sheridan Le Fanu’s “An Account of Some Disturbances in Aungier Street,” originally
published in Dublin University Magazine in 1853. The narrator, who introduces himself as an
excitable and nervous person, and his cousin, whom he describes as the ultimate sceptic, “very

56 Oliphant, 84.
57 Oliphant, 52.
58 Oliphant, 84.
exact in his observance of truth,”59 decide to lodge together in a certain house in Aungier Street. The house itself is a sombre setting, according to the narrator, who states that “it had seen years and changes enough to have contracted all that mysterious and saddened air, at once exciting and depressing, which belongs to most old mansions.”60 This makes it somewhat similar to the typical Gothic setting, with the notable difference that it is in the middle of a busy city, instead of desolate and wild nature. Nevertheless, all the descriptions given of the house and its interiors, especially the master bedroom, seem to excite a feeling of unease and oppression which certainly colours the perception of the protagonist. He insists that “[the] whole room was, I can't tell how, repulsive to me. There was, I suppose, in its proportions and features, a latent discord – a certain mysterious and indescribable relation, which jarred indistinctly upon some secret sense of the fitting and the safe, and raised indefinable suspicions and apprehensions of the imagination.”61

To further set up the story, both the tenants are treated to the gruesome history of the house by one of its old inhabitants: “this woman, I say, remembered it, when old Judge Horrocks (who, having earned the reputation of a particularly 'hanging judge', ended by hanging himself, as the coroner's jury found, under an impulse of 'temporary insanity', with a child's skipping rope, over the massive old banisters).”62 From all these circumstances, it could be argued that both men are psychologically primed to expect something strange, and as such are in no way impartial observers. The narrator, who already confessed to a nervous temperament, becomes plagued with nightmares:

I saw, or thought I saw, with the most abominable distinctness, although at the time in profound darkness, every article of furniture and accidental arrangement of the

60 Le Fanu, 105.
61 Le Fanu, 106.
62 Le Fanu, 105.
chamber in which I lay. This, as you know, is incidental to ordinary nightmare… and, after an interval, which always seemed to me of the same length, a picture suddenly flew up to the window, where it remained fixed, as if by an electrical attraction, and my discipline of horror then commenced, to last perhaps for hours.  

He then describes in detail the sinister visage of an old and debauched man, which could well be inspired by the story he heard about the judge, a portrait he saw, or it could be a genuine representation of the deceased master of the house. Nowhere in the story is there any material confirmation that this is what the judge actually looked like. He takes courage to mention his nightmares to his cousin, leaving out his apprehensions that is might be a vision, or something more.

The solution they devise is to treat the nightmares as a symptom of indigestion: “true to the imputed materialism of medicine, we put our heads together to dispel my horrors, not by exorcism, but by a tonic.” 64 This is the point where the reader is confronted with another possible solution – not nervous excitement and fancy exacerbated by a gruesome story, but a physical disorder. The tonic seems to work to some extent, reports the narrator: “I will do this tonic justice, and frankly admit that the accursed portrait began to intermit its visits under its influence.” 65 Nevertheless, he is in no way decided about the origin of his nightly visions, asking himself: “Was this singular apparition – as full of character as of terror – therefore the creature of my fancy, or the invention of my poor stomach?” 66 Both explanations are in keeping with recent revelations about the character of vision. He goes on to formulate the crux of the conflict regarding the faculty of sight: “Was it, in short, subjective (to borrow the technical slang of the day) and not the palpable aggression and intrusion of an external agent?” 67

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63 Le Fanu, 106.
64 Le Fanu, 107.
65 Le Fanu, 107.
66 Le Fanu, 107.
67 Le Fanu, 107.
establishes the doubt that is prevalent in the story. The narrator is not attempting to decide whether what he saw is of a physical or spiritual origin, but rather whether he can actually trust his own eyes. The uncertainty as to whether the thing he saw actually has any external correspondent, or whether it only exists inside of his own mind makes the narrator quite oblivious to examining the purpose of the vision itself, focusing instead on a thorough consideration of all the possible afflictions of the eye that could have led to it. He adds the possible spiritual explanation as well, although he treats it medically, erasing much of its mysticism:

[Here] is an obvious connection between the material and the invisible; the healthy tone of the system, and its unimpaired energy, may, for aught we can tell, guard us against influences which would otherwise render life itself terrific. The mesmerist and the electro-biologist will fail upon an average with nine patients out of ten – so may the evil spirit. Special conditions of the corporeal system are indispensable to the production of certain spiritual phenomena. The operation succeeds sometimes – sometimes fails – that is all.68

He puts forward the idea that our physical body, when well kept, protects us against intrusion from the spiritual world, and that the appearance of spiritual phenomena is a consequence of a certain mistreatment of the corporeal system. He also does not hesitate to call the spirit “evil”69 and appears to be decided that the influences that leak over from the invisible world mean him no good. Ironically, if the vision’s intention is indeed to harm, this paralysis of deliberation supplies it with a perfect opportunity, as seen later in the story. However, the protagonist is undecided, and the story continues to unfold.

The reader learns about another circumstance that may come into play while deciding about the nature of the visions. The narrator says “I had adopted the practice recommended by the wisdom

68 Le Fanu, 107-108.
69 Le Fanu, 107.
of my ancestors, and 'kept my spirits up by pouring spirits down.'\textsuperscript{70} This fact is then reiterated subtly throughout the rest of the story, providing an attentive reader with another source of doubt as to the degree to which the accuracy of the narrator’s vision might be compromised. At first, the unexplained phenomena are not visible at all – there are only noises, which the narrator describes as “slow, heavy tread, characterized by the emphasis and deliberation of age…it was plain that the feet which produced it were perfectly bare.”\textsuperscript{71} He seems to be decided that the noise are footsteps – not only human ones, but specifically those of an old man with bare feet – which suggests that he has already decided that the noise is surely connected with his vision. He even says, “I expected every moment to see my door open spontaneously, and give admission to the original of my detested portrait.”\textsuperscript{72} He does not see anything that night, which seems to only heighten his misgivings.

At the next opportunity, he decides to investigate further. He commences his recollection with “This time I had had my punch, and the morale of the garrison was consequently excellent,”\textsuperscript{73} which already makes his account a bit doubtful to the reader. He takes the poker from the fire, but omits to take any light with him. In the darkened lobby, he reports, “I saw, or thought I saw, a black monster, whether in the shape of a man or a bear I could not say, standing, with its back to the wall, on the lobby, facing me, with a pair of great greenish eyes shining dimly out.” Somewhat sheepishly, he qualifies this revelation by adding “I must be frank, and confess that the cupboard which displayed our plates and cups stood just there, though at the moment I did not recollect it.”\textsuperscript{74} He is convinced that what he saw was real. Regardless, his description of the event is quite ambiguous:

\textsuperscript{70} Le Fanu, 109.
\textsuperscript{71} Le Fanu, 109-10.
\textsuperscript{72} Le Fanu, 110.
\textsuperscript{73} Le Fanu, 110.
\textsuperscript{74} Le Fanu, 110-111.
[This] apparition, after one or two shiftings of shape, as if in the act of incipient transformation, began, as it seemed on second thoughts, to advance upon me in its original form. From an instinct of terror rather than of courage, I hurled the poker, with all my force, at its head; and to the music of a horrid crash made my way into my room, and double-locked the door.\(^{75}\)

The shiftings of shape could just as well be attributed to a supernatural phantom as to distorted vision caused by intoxication. Similarly, the irrational reaction of throwing the poker at the shadow could be both an act of self-defence from a man terrified by an unknown intruder and an instance of inability to think clearly. The story leaves room for conjecture, no matter how sure the narrator appears to be. The only material evidence is a broken tea-service. On the next occasion, the narrator is decided to finally look closely at the supposed apparition. He says, “I lighted two candles instead of one…and held myself in readiness for a sally, candle in hand;… I was resolved to see the being, if visible at all, who troubled the nightly stillness of my mansion.”\(^{76}\) Again there is the reference to spirits: “I sat down and stared at the square label on the solemn and reserved-looking black bottle, until ‘FLANAGAN & CO.’S BEST OLD MALT WHISKY’ grew into a sort of subdued accompaniment to all the fantastic and horrible speculations which chased one another through my brain.”\(^{77}\) And later “My courage was ebbing. Punch, however, which makes beasts of so many, made a man of me again.”\(^{78}\) It is questionable why this circumstance is stressed if not to give the reader another possible interpretation of the narrator’s state of mind. Finally, when he hears the noise again, he takes a candle and goes to see its cause.

When I peeped out the lobby was perfectly empty – there was no monster standing on the staircase; and as the detested sound ceased, I was reassured enough to venture

\(^{75}\) Le Fanu, 111.  
\(^{76}\) Le Fanu, 111.  
\(^{77}\) Le Fanu, 111.  
\(^{78}\) Le Fanu, 112.
forward nearly to the banisters. Horror of horrors! Within a stair or two beneath the
spot where I stood the unearthly tread smote the floor. My eye caught something in
motion; it was about the size of Goliath's foot – it was grey, heavy, and flapped with
a dead weight from one step to another. As I am alive, it was the most monstrous grey
rat I ever beheld or imagined.79

What he discovers seems to be a material proof of a perfectly rational explanation for the noise
– a big rat, thumping down the stairs. Arguably, the narrator was so convinced of a supernatural
agency and so mentally prepared to witness it that he manages to see it in the rat, to which he
ascribes “a perfectly human expression of malice,”80 “the infernal gaze and the accursed
countenance of my old friend in the portrait.”81 It is ironic that the self-professed nervous and
excitable narrator, who is fully prepared to believe in spirits, witnesses only things that are quite
easily explainable, such as dreams, a shadow and a rat, while his sceptic friend has a much more
convincing story to tell.

When Tom, the cousin, first hears a noise, he believes it to be “mice in the wainscot”82 and
goes back to trying to sleep. What he witnesses is

an old man, rather stout and square, in a sort of roan-red dressing-gown, and with a
black cap on his head, moving stiffly and slowly in a diagonal direction, from the
recess, across the floor of the bedroom, passing my bed at the foot, and entering the
lumber-closet at the left. 83

Morning investigation of the room yields no evidence of human agency, and although afraid,
Tom decides not to share his experience. When nothing happens the next several nights, Tom
reports, “I grew more confident, and began to fancy that I believed in the theories of spectral

79 Le Fanu, 112.
80 Le Fanu, 112.
81 Le Fanu, 112.
82 Le Fanu, 114.
83 Le Fanu, 114.
He starts to question the objectivity of his sight, similarly to his cousin, but arrives at a different conclusion: “How the deuce had I seen it? It was a dark night; I had no candle; there was no fire; and yet I saw it as distinctly, in colouring and outline, as ever I beheld a human form! A cataleptic dream would explain it all; and I was determined that a dream it should be.”

Although rationally decided not to give it credit, Tom also seems to be affected by fear and nervousness. His next sight of the apparition comes after he woke up “bewildered and feverish” from a nightmare, and is attempting to go back to sleep:

I saw the same accursed figure standing full front, and gazing at me with its stony and fiendish countenance, not two yards from the bedside.

“For about three seconds only I saw it plainly; then it grew indistinct; but, for a long time, there was something like a column of dark vapour where it had been standing, between me and the wall; and I felt sure that he was still there. After a good while, this appearance went too.”

Several explanations could be presented here as well. Firstly, the apparition could be the result of Tom’s less than ideal mental state, a projection of his fear and nervousness. Secondly, it could be an optical illusion, a theory supported by the fact that it grows indistinct after a moment of looking at it. Lastly, it could be an actual apparition, convincing the sceptic of the reality of the spiritual world.

After this, Tom’s physical and mental state further deteriorates. He says, “For more than a week I never slept in bed. I sometimes had a snooze on a form in the "Robin Hood", and sometimes

84 Le Fanu, 114.
85 Le Fanu, 115.
86 Le Fanu, 115.
87 Le Fanu, 116.
a nap in a chair during the day; regular sleep I had absolutely none”\textsuperscript{88} and admits that he “was growing absolutely ill from this wretched mode of life”\textsuperscript{89} In this state of exhaustion, he falls asleep in the room for the last time, and experiences the last vision:

There was a figure seated in that lumbering, old sofa-chair, near the fireplace. Its back was rather towards me, but I could not be mistaken; it turned slowly round, and, merciful heavens! there was the stony face, with its infernal lineaments of malignity and despair, gloating on me. There was now no doubt as to its consciousness of my presence, and the hellish malice with which it was animated, for it arose, and drew close to the bedside. There was a rope about its neck, and the other end, coiled up, it held stiffly in its hand.

"My good angel nerved me for this horrible crisis. I remained for some seconds transfixed by the gaze of this tremendous phantom. He came close to the bed, and appeared on the point of mounting upon it. The next instant I was upon the floor at the far side, and in a moment more was, I don't know how, upon the lobby.

"But the spell was not yet broken; the valley of the shadow of death was not yet traversed. The abhorred phantom stood before me there; it was standing near the banisters, stooping a little, and with one end of the rope round its own neck, was poising a noose at the other, as if to throw over mine; and while engaged in this baleful pantomime, it wore a smile so sensual, so unspeakably dreadful, that my senses were nearly overpowered. I saw and remember nothing more, until I found myself in your room.\textsuperscript{90}

This last experience still leaves the reader in doubt, since he is aware that Tom was depleted both physically and mentally, which might contribute to a vivid nightmare accompanied by sleepwalking. Tom admits that he does not know how he left his room, or how he got to his cousin’s room, and his state of confusion while there also suggests unconscious action, such as

\textsuperscript{88} Le Fanu, 116-17.
\textsuperscript{89} Le Fanu, 117.
\textsuperscript{90} Le Fanu, 117-118.
somnambulism. Furthermore, we have the same scene earlier in the story, told to us by the narrator, who provides additional information about “the loud clang of what turned out to be a large brass candlestick, flung with all his force by poor Tom Ludlow over the banisters,”91 his “state of extraordinary agitation”92 and even a look at the scene of the apparition: “[Tom was] staring through the great old banister opposite, at the lobby window, through which the sickly light of a clouded moon was gleaming.”93 When Tom finally speaks, he also seems to have just woken up: “It's nothing, nothing at all – did I speak? – what did I say? – Where's the candle, Richard? It's dark; I – I had a candle!”94 However, the idea of supernatural agency cannot be discounted either, since some of the circumstances of Tom’s vision, as revealed by the maid, reflect the past events perfectly although he could not have known them. She exclaims “was it not in the alcove he got the rope ready that done his own business at last,”95 and describes much the same progression of events as Tom saw. The evidence for supernatural agency is also corroborated by the maid’s stories about the other unfortunate tenants, although, conveniently enough, all the direct witnesses are either dead or insane, leaving no possibility of investigation. The story closes with the narrator’s report that the house in Aungier Street has since burned down and been rebuilt, closing the case, and leaving the reader to wonder. Neither the sceptic nor the believer are fully vindicated, and the question of what they saw and whether it was subjective or objective remains wide open.

2.4 The moment of hesitation

Both stories discussed above are examples of how Victorian ghost stories use the current theories about light and vision in order to establish the “moment of hesitation”96 which Todorov

91 Le Fanu, 108.
92 Le Fanu, 108.
93 Le Fanu, 108.
94 Le Fanu, 108.
95 Le Fanu, 119.
96 Todorov, 25.
considers to be the defining feature of fantastic literature. In most of the ghost stories the characters believe that they can dispel hesitation by shedding enough light on the scene, or looking closely enough – and are invariably disappointed. The protagonist of H.G. Wells’s “The Red Room” (The Idler Magazine, March 1896) who is determined to debunk the stories of a haunted room, makes “a systematic examination of the place”\(^97\) and lights no less than “seventeen candles…so placed that not an inch of the room but had the direct light of at least one of them.”\(^98\) His objective is “by leaving nothing to the imagination, [to] dispel the fanciful suggestions of the obscurity…”\(^99\) Lighting the room is the equivalent of knowing it, of making it a part of the logical, familiar, physical world. The frenzy of terror that the narrator experiences is not due to the visible manifestation of anything strange, but rather the inability to see. The candles keep snuffing out, which could have various perfectly logical reasons, including the fact that in his panic, he puts them out himself by reckless movements. However, the mere suggestion that there is darkness, and consequently something unseen could be happening is enough to drive the supposedly “matter-of-fact”\(^100\) man completely distracted. In the light of day he reverts back to his former stance on ghosts, and explains that what haunts the room is not a ghost but “fear that will not have light nor sound, that will not bear with reason, that deafens and darkens and overwhelms. It followed me through the corridor, it fought against me in the room… The candles went out one after another, and I fled –. “\(^101\) In contrast to this explanation, the narrator’s companion ascribes a magical origin to what he witnessed, calling it “A Power of Darkness.”\(^102\) This shows the tendency to present a choice between a supernatural and natural explanation for the events of the story. Also, the play on “darkness” as actual absence of light and “Darkness” as a power of evil can be taken as an illustration of the

\(^{98}\) Wells, 293.
\(^{99}\) Wells, 291.
\(^{100}\) Wells, 291.
\(^{101}\) Wells, 295.
\(^{102}\) Wells, 295.
importance of sight for the Victorians. Most other ghost stories follow suit and present more or less elaborate conflict of explanations for the visual evidence. The narrator in Amelia Edwards’s “The New Pass,” (1873) after witnessing what his friend assures him is a vision of his dead brother, reasons in the following fashion, counter to his friend’s belief:

that it was an illusion, I did not doubt for a moment. Such phenomena, though not common, are by no means unheard-of. I had talked with more than one eminent physician on this very subject, and I remembered that each had spoken of cases within his own experience.103

Similarly, in Charles Dickens’s “To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt” (1865) the narrator says, “In what I am going to relate I have no intention of setting up, opposing, or supporting, any theory whatever…”104 proceeding to list some well-known ghost-debunking stories, which will be discussed later. The protagonist of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s “The House and the Brain” (1859) is convinced that the apparitions are a product of thought-transference which “originate in some brain now far distant; that that brain had no distinct volition in anything that occurred; that what does occur reflects but its devious, motley, ever-shifting, half-formed thoughts; in short, that it has been but the dreams of such a brain put into action and invested with a semi-substance.”105 In all these cases the explanations are contrasted with the actual evidence, which strongly suggests an explanation that fits Todorov’s term “marvellous”106 – while the characters seem decided to view the events as examples of “the uncanny.”107 This defining conflict of the ghost stories reflects the anxiety about vision and knowledge that was current in the Victorian age, and instead of assuaging it, as realistic novels, detective stories and other genres that

106 Todorov, 41-42.
107 Todorov, 41-42.
depend on vision do, ghost stories heighten it by showing that sometimes vision fails to
ascertain the truth, and by presenting the reader with conflicting visual evidence that is never
fully explained.
Chapter 3: Methods of Investigation

The preceding chapter discussed the way in which Victorian ghost stories establish the moment of hesitation by destabilizing the concept of vision as a trustworthy source of evidence. Todorov’s definition allows for two simple options between which the character hesitates: the uncanny – something unlikely but explainable through natural laws; or the marvellous – something supernatural but accepted as an “integral part of reality.” Accordingly, he offers two definitive solutions to a ghost story – either the event is part of the world as we know it and as such can be explained by existing laws (the uncanny), or it is supernatural, not from this world and as such must be accepted for what it is (the marvellous). This dichotomy became somewhat more complicated for the Victorians, who had many more explanations readily available. An apparition could truly be a communication from a world beyond our own, which would mean that either God has suspended the normal laws of nature in order to allow this, or that ghosts are a natural phenomenon that simply operates according to laws that had not yet been discovered. Therefore, even if it is conceded that the apparition is truly a soul of a departed, it is still explainable as either the uncanny or the marvellous. Another option is that the ghost is the product of the mind, in which case it can either be the result of a diseased mental state, or of what Hibbert calls “recollected images” which imagination calls into a sane mind so strongly that they appear on the retina. Lastly, spectral apparitions could also be a result of physical causes, either of illness – a symptom comparable to fever or chills, which the patient feels, but which have no reality – or of the imperfect working of the organ of sight, an optical illusion. I would argue that none of these explanations, in itself, would be too daunting for the Victorians, since each of them can in some way be incorporated into their everyday reality. The source of

1 Todorov, 25.
2 Hibbert, 67.
anxiety seems to be the impossibility of arriving at a definitive conclusion, rather than the acceptance of any of the options as the truth. What the ghost stories, at their best, achieve is to take the commonly trusted methods of arriving at the truth and show how unreliable they truly are, leading the reader to hesitation on another level: calling into question not only the existence and the nature of the ghost, but also the possibility of discovering the objective truth.

3.1 The illusion of the disinterested observer

The most common method employed in ascertaining the truth is that of scientific investigation. This, according to Frances O’Gorman, requires one “to adopt the role of the disinterested observer [attaining to] an epistemological ideal of self-sacrifice, or self-annihilation, in order to reach a position of objectivity from which to locate truth or describe reality.” This approach was at the time already severely undermined by the new discoveries and theories of vision, in which vision had been shown to be highly subjective and dependent upon the observer. In addition to the physical impossibility of objective observation, Victorian ghost stories also show the impossibility of the ideal, unbiased and objective mindset that seems to be the touchstone of scientific investigation. Either the person is not involved in the events, which means that he or she does not have the credibility of a direct witness, or they are involved, in which case they lose objectivity. Every supposedly disinterested observer in the ghost stories is in the end revealed to be subjective.

A representative example of this tension between objectivity and subjectivity can be found in “The Story of Nicolai, the Bookseller of Berlin,” an allegedly factual witness account that was frequently used in support of the theory of spectral apparitions. It was included both in Edward Ferriar’s An Essay Toward a Theory of Apparitions (1813), and in Sir Walter Scott’s Letters on

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Demonology and Witchcraft (1830). It is also quite frequently mentioned in fictional ghost stories – Dickens’s narrator in “To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt” says, “I know the history of the Bookseller of Berlin.”4 The narrator in Edwards’s “The New Pass” also remembers that “there was the famous case of Nicolai, the bookseller of Berlin, not to mention many others, equally well attested.”5 It could be argued that this was one of the most notorious stories quoted in order to discredit supposedly real ghost stories. Nicolai, “the celebrated author and bookseller of Berlin,”6 gives an account of his own experience with spectral apparitions. His account is first-hand, which gives it credibility over many supposedly real ghost stories that were circulated as proof of the existence of ghosts, the authors of which were often quite removed from the actual events. He asserts that he was “in a state of mind completely sound” when he saw “with perfect calmness, for nearly two months, almost constantly and involuntarily a vast number of human and other forms, and even heard their voices.”7 He then assumes the role of a disinterested observer, saying “It being a matter of considerable importance that an incident of this nature should be observed with the strictest attention, and related, together with all collateral circumstances, with the most conscientious fidelity, I shall not omit anything of which I retain a clear recollection.”8 This manner of relating the story is exactly in keeping with the scientific principles of observation and objective evaluation which no doubt appealed to the Victorians’ confidence in what they considered scientific authority. However, the account itself could easily make the reader doubt whether the narrator is indeed as objective as he asserts himself to be. He reports that he “suffered a series of misfortunes”9 that affected him with “the most poignant grief,”10 and makes it a point to mention several times in the story that he was

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4 Dickens, 80.  
5 Edwards, 83.  
6 Ferriar, 41.  
7 Ferriar, 42.  
8 Ferriar, 43.  
9 Ferriar, 44.  
10 Ferriar, 44.
“agitated by a series of incidents,” suggesting that his mental state was far from ideal. He also admits that “when the first terror was over, I beheld the phantasms with great emotion and… I could not make out any natural connection between the occupations of my mind, my occupations, my regular thoughts, and the multifarious forms which now appeared to me, and now again disappeared.” This means that the supposedly disinterested observer is very much invested in the situation, and, far from only reporting what he has observed, decides to assign cause to the phantoms, although he admits that he cannot find a reasonable origin in his thoughts for them. His solution is to treat them as symptoms of a medical condition, although he also states that his “mind and body were in a tolerable state of sanity all this time.” He also insists that just by looking carefully enough it is possible to tell what is real and what is not: “I could at the same time distinguish between phantasms and real objects, and the calmness with which I examined them, enabled me to avoid the commission of the smallest mistake.” This perpetuates the centrality of observation as a means of knowing the truth, despite the fact that the whole theory of apparitions as medical symptoms is based on the idea that the eyes can deceive us. Furthermore, it once again reveals the discrepancy between the author’s self-professed disordered mental state, and his supposed ability to detachedly and precisely observe and identify the apparitions, which he elsewhere says appeared “as if they were presented to me from without, like the phenomena of nature.” The apparitions eventually disappear – an outcome which the narrator connects to the fact that he had leeches applied earlier that day. Hence his conclusion is that the apparitions were due to “a diseased state of the nerves and an irregular circulation of the blood.” Therefore the supposed ghost is explained as a medical condition. However, there is a significant discrepancy in the story – the supposedly objective

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11 Ferriar, 45.  
12 Ferriar, 48.  
13 Ferriar, 53.  
14 Ferriar, 50.  
15 Ferriar, 50.  
16 Ferriar, 43.
narrator is at the same time the subject of the medical condition that he reports, asserting to be perfectly well and able to make conclusions and at the same time to be physically and emotionally compromised and in need of a medical treatment.

Another supposedly professional and disinterested observer can be found in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea,” first published in Dickens’s All the Year Round in 1869. Unlike Nicolai, Dr Hesselius is not at the same time the subject of his own investigation, and he has no personal ties to his patient, which would seem to make him a good candidate for a perfectly objective investigator. However, he is soon shown to be far from unbiased. His first impression of Mr. Jennings is a second-hand account of him from his friend, Lady Mary, who informs the doctor that “he is most anxious to be actively employed in his sacred profession, and yet though always tolerably well elsewhere, when he goes down to his vicarage in Warwickshire, to engage in the actual duties of his sacred calling, his health soon fails him, and in a very strange way.”¹⁷ This information is apparently enough for Dr Hesselius to form an idea of the diagnosis, saying “I have my own opinion about that. There are degrees of course. We shall see.”¹⁸ He seems to have a very fixed idea about what is wrong with Reverend Jennings, conceding only that he does not know to what degree he is affected. From this moment on, he is only confirming his previously formed hypothesis. Another scene shows that he was apparently looking for a subject to confirm the general hypothesis that he has had for some time. He admits that

A medical philosopher, as you are good enough to call me, elaborating theories by the aid of cases sought out by himself, and by him watched and scrutinised with more time at command, and consequently infinitely more minuteness than the ordinary practitioner can afford, falls insensibly into habits of observation, which accompany

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¹⁸ Le Fanu, 11.
him everywhere, and are exercised, as some people would say, impertinently, upon every subject that presents itself with the least likelihood of rewarding inquiry.\textsuperscript{19}

This suggests that although he has no personal connection to Jennings, Dr Hesselius has his own agenda, which is to find a case that would prove his hypothesis. Hence his frame of mind is in no way conducive to objective investigation of Jennings’s condition. Another step in his investigation is to ask questions, not of Mr. Jennings, but of Lady Mary. His questions are in fact statements, which she merely confirms, and which are exclusively connected to his already formed hypothesis. He does not attempt to amass any more information or pose questions that are not immediately connected with his own idea of what is happening, which leaves his investigation somewhat incomplete and definitely not objective. Planning to visit his “subject,”\textsuperscript{20} Dr Hesselius is only concerned with getting a confirmation of what he already knows: “Does he intend opening his case, and consulting me “professionally,” as they say? I hope so. I have already conceived a theory about him. It is supported by Lady Mary’s answers to my parting questions. I should like much to ascertain from his own lips. But what can I do consistently with good breeding to invite a confession?”\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly enough, Mr. Jennings complains of his physician, Dr Harley, saying that “he seems to me, one half blind—I mean one half of all he looks at is dark—preternaturally bright and vivid all the rest; and the worst of it is, it seems \textit{wilful}.\textsuperscript{22} Something similar could be said for Dr Hesselius, who seems quite wilful in ascribing Jennings’s problems to his own particular theory, despite the fact that Jennings has not described his case to him yet. From the account that Reverend Jennings himself gives, there are several possible explanations. He mentions that the subject he was writing on is “not good for the mind – the Christian mind, I mean. Paganism is all bound together in essential unity, and, with evil sympathy, their religion involves their art, and both their manners,
and the subject is a degrading fascination and the Nemesis sure. God forgive me!”\textsuperscript{23} This might suggest a supernatural reason, bound up with religion. There are also possible psychological causes, since he admits to staying up late and being thoroughly engrossed in his subject, the nature of which could easily excite his imagination to come up with an illusion. Then he remembers his reading about “spectral illusions,”\textsuperscript{24} and the idea is solidified in his mind. From the evidence he gives it could convincingly be argued that his mind is the author of his own affliction. However, Dr Hesselius never considers other possibilities than his own theory, even though Rev. Jennings long since stopped using the green tea, which the doctor identifies as the cause of his inner sight being unveiled, and it gained him no reprieve. Hesselius also says that Jennings “remembered and applied though quite in a mistaken way, the principle which I lay down in my Metaphysical Medicine, and which governs all such cases.”\textsuperscript{25} And yet there is no indication that Hesselius’s principle had an effect on the reverend. The matter is left unresolved, as Reverend Jennings ends his own life before Dr Hesselius can try his treatment on him, leaving the doctor perfectly confident that his diagnosis was correct and that the treatment would have worked: “I have not, I repeat, the slightest doubt that I should have first dimmed and ultimately sealed that inner eye which Mr. Jennings had inadvertently opened.”\textsuperscript{26} The suicide is easily explained away by Hesselius as “a result of a totally different malady…hereditary suicidal mania,”\textsuperscript{27} despite the fact that his patient reported at least one other case when the apparition tempted him to do away with his life, saying, “[The] brute that accompanied me was urging me to throw myself down the shaft.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus the case remains unclear to the reader, whose doubt can easily extend to the person of the narrator who, despite his credentials, does not act as a truly objective and detached observer. The doubt is also

\textsuperscript{23} Le Fanu, 47. 
\textsuperscript{24} Le Fanu, 57. 
\textsuperscript{25} Le Fanu, 83. 
\textsuperscript{26} Le Fanu, 94. 
\textsuperscript{27} Le Fanu, 95. 
\textsuperscript{28} Le Fanu, 76.
increased by the fact that the story is not only a first-person account by an unreliable narrator, but is also mediated as well as translated by the person of the editor, who confesses to having “omitted” and “shortened” unspecified passages, which adds another layer of uncertainty to a text that is nominally presented as scientific examination of the case by a neutral observer.

3.2 The conflict of authorities

The other recourse that the Victorians had was to rely on the statements of the authority, and to accept them as truth. In the case of ghosts this practice became quite infeasible, since for every scientific account of ghosts as illusions, there was an equally scientific account of ghosts as visitors from another, invisible realm. Initially, the scientifically minded authors were combatting the traditional, superstitious belief in ghosts as supernatural phenomena. However, with the advance of science, more and more believers in ghosts availed themselves of the scientific rhetoric. They no longer claimed ghosts to be mystical or unexplainable, but rather a natural phenomenon that needed to be scientifically observed and described. James Thatcher prefaced his attempt at a rational explanation of ghosts, An Essay on Demonology, Ghosts and Apparitions and Popular Superstitions (1831), by saying that “the popular belief in supernatural visitations in the form of apparitions or spectres, is fostered and encouraged by the baneful influence of superstition and prejudice,” adding that “superstition arises from, and is sustained by ignorance and credulity in the understanding.” This attempt to create an easy dichotomy between credulous, unscientific belief in ghosts, and a researched, trustworthy explanation of them as a product of the nerves is unsuccessful, since spiritualists and other ghost-believers turn the same argument around. Catherine Crowe argues in The Night Side of Nature: Or, Ghosts and Ghost-Seers (1853), that “[believing] the appearance to be an illusion, because they cannot

29 Le Fanu, 3.
31 Thatcher, 2.
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, except to invalidate their capacity for judging the question, at all.”

She ascribes blind credulity to the other side, since they are refusing to investigate the phenomena in a scientific manner, writing them off as illusions. Importantly, all the theories about the origin and nature of ghosts were just that – theories, which had a certain amount of evidence to support them, but none of them could be claimed as proven. James Thatcher proposes that

the nerves are the medium of illusions; their influence pervades the whole body, and their various impressions are transmitted to the brain. When the entire brain is affected, delirium is the consequence; if the optic nerve only, visions disturb the imagination; if the acoustic nerves receive the impression, unreal sounds or voices are heard…The nervous system is liable to be diseased and deranged from various causes, from which, it is obvious, derangement of both body and mind must ensue.

His theory is supported by the President of the College of New Jersey, Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, D.D., who postulates that sensations are a product of “any motion, vibration or affection in the nervous system” and if these become “irregular” the result is “unreal images [being] raised in the mind.”

This theory is based on the ongoing research into the nature of the nerves, and is supported by an 1842 report to the Royal Society, where James Stark, M.D. claims to have determined, through “examinations, both microscopical and chemical,” that sensations are “best explained on the hypothesis of undulations or vibrations propagated along the course of the tubes which compose the nerves, by the medium of the oily globules they

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33 Thatcher, 5.
34 Thatcher, 5-6.
This gives the theory a certain credibility; nevertheless, there is no guarantee that “vibrations” caused by a disease would in fact produce a false mental image.

Meanwhile, proponents of the existence of spirits as independent agencies that communicate with our world made use of a different scientific theory to advance their claim – the theory about the luminiferous ether. The theory was inspired by Isaac Newton’s speculations in his *Opticks* (1718), about an “aetherial medium” that “refracts the rays of light…by bending them gradually in curve lines.” This theory was adopted by most nineteenth century scientists as an elegant explanation for the behaviour of light. William Kingdon Clifford explains that

> When [a gas lamp] is burning, there is a tremendous disturbance set up by numerous atoms of carbon getting united each with two atoms of oxygen and then shaking about violently. They shake about and transfer that shake to something which is all over this room and all through space, which is called the *luminiferous ether*, because it carries such shaking as takes place when a thing is burnt, and the atoms fall into a more convenient position in consequence, from place to place, and that *shake* when carried by the luminiferous ether is what we call *light*.

This theory validated some of the claims of the spiritualists, since it deals with something completely invisible and there is no way of proving that it is indeed there, and thus, even more so than electricity, it has to be taken on faith and probability. Bourchier Wrey Saville, in his 1874 book *Apparitions: A Narrative of Facts*, proposes apparitions to be “a species of vaporous essence, invisible in its normal state, but during the…convulsive moment which separates soul and body…exercising some of the properties of matter.” He bolsters his theory by mentioning the luminiferous ether, and adds that “If it be objected that this essence is of a form so subtle as

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36 Stark, 434.
37 Thatcher, 17.
39 Newton, 324.
to be incapable of acting on matter, or of affecting the eye or ear – we can point to the most subtle and invisible of fluids, like electricity, from which, as science teaches, the most powerful agents are obtained.”

Saville’s theory puts ghosts on the same level as other invisible substances that are subjects of scientific inquiry, and suggests “that these mysterious visitations, instead of being, as some allege, the suspension or supercession of natural laws, may prove to be rather the complete fulfilment of one of the most beautiful and interesting of the marvellous code.” If taken to be a result of natural laws, apparitions need to be examined and objectively described, which is precisely what the spiritualists proposed. Sir Alfred Russel Wallace quotes Dr George Sexton, originally a sceptic, who was convinced by investigating the phenomena for himself, that it “is the business of the man of science to use his utmost endeavours to discover [the laws of nature by which apparitions operate].”

Similarly, Newton Crosland, in Apparitions: An Essay, Explanatory of Old Facts and a New Theory (1873) urges that “a wide field of investigation is here open for able, enlightened, and unprejudiced scholars to cultivate. By making the apparitions a matter of science, and asserting that they are only a product of some yet undiscovered law of nature, the spiritualists attempted to incorporate ghosts into the Victorian worldview as proof of the independent life of the spirit, and the fact that, as Wallace put it, “Progressive evolution of the Intellectual and moral nature is the destiny of Individuals.”

These theories, originally meant to enlighten the question of ghosts, only contributed to the doubt and uncertainty surrounding the existence of spirits, since there was no unassailable claim of authority on the matter. They made it impossible to discount ghosts as mere products of superstition, while the equally scientific claims about ghosts as the result of a medical condition

42 Saville, 26.
43 Saville, 29.
44 Wallace, 7.
46 Wallace, 56.
made it difficult to decide between the internal and external nature of the apparitions. Thus, the narrator of “The New Pass” (1873) can invoke medical authority on the matter of apparitions, saying “Such phenomena, though not common, are by no means unheard-of. I had talked with more than one eminent physician on this very subject, and I remembered that each had spoken of cases within his own experience.”47 At the same time, the narrator of Lafcadio Hearn’s “A Ghost Story” (1884) can with equal confidence state: “that…electrical phenomena in human beings…have been seen and studied is beyond dispute; and while we grant the existence of mysterious powers of one sort on such rare testimony, we cannot reasonably reject the existence of other powers still more incomprehensible, but equally well authenticated.”48 The protagonist in Bulwer-Lytton’s “The Haunted and the Haunters” (1859) reads the essays of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who was known for “the markedly unspiritual tone of his writings”49 and who, according to James Cotter Morrison had no time for psychological or spiritual research since he believed that “science should only be cultivated for its immediate practical and beneficial results.”50 He praises “the strong daylight sense”51 in Macaulay, but at the same time, he also cites as proven “the now familiar phenomena of mesmerism and electro-biology”52 as well as “a material fluid – call it Electric, call it Odic, call it what you will – which has the power of traversing space and passing obstacles,”53 revealing, without realizing it, the contradiction in the assertions of the authorities he elects to trust. This complicates the straightforward solution of simply adopting the generally accepted opinion. In order to exercise unconditional trust in authority, the Victorian protagonist has to suppress equally scientific writings of other authorities, and convince himself that there is no contradiction in taking some

47 Edwards, 83.
50 Morison, 104.
51 Bulwer-Lytton, 13.
52 Bulwer-Lytton, 12.
53 Bulwer-Lytton, 12.
scientific tenets on faith and discarding others, just as unsubstantiated, as rubbish. Such attitude is difficult to reconcile with the desire to find the objective truth, but necessary to defeat hesitation, leaving the characters to decide which is the lesser evil.

3.3. The inescapable hesitation: “The Captain of the Pole Star”

In his 1883 contribution to the *Temple Bar* magazine, “The Captain of the Pole Star,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle combines all the possible means to create a compelling and unresolved mystery. The story is in the form of diary entries, which preserve the immediate reactions of the narrator and serve very well to show his gradual progress from certainty to doubt as to the events of the story. The narrator is a student of medicine, and as such is predisposed to ascribe the ghost sightings to nerves, alcohol, group psychology or mental illness before even considering anything supernatural. The crew, on the contrary, seems to be led by their culture and upbringing to immediately consider the events to be a work of evil spirits, and to interpret every event as a sign that the ship is cursed. Thus, there is no disinterested observer on board the ship, except perhaps the “second engineer” who “would care nothing for all the fiends in the Red Sea so long as they would leave him alone and not disarrange his tools,” showing the attitude of utmost practicality, also current in the Victorian times, but contributing nothing towards an explanation of the ghost. The narrator, in keeping with his profession, talks about “an outbreak of superstition” and complains that “we have had a perfect epidemic of it this voyage.” He regards the ghost-sighting as a symptom of a nervous disorder brought on by superstition, and his reaction to the crewman who comes to him with his story of the ghost is to give him “some chloral and bromide of potassium [...] to steady him down.” The noises that the crew professes

55 Doyle, 11.
56 Doyle, 7.
57 Doyle, 8.
to hear are to him “either the creaking of the rudder-chains, or the cry of some passing seabird” and the apparition sighted on the ice “a young bear erect upon its hind legs, an attitude which they often assume when alarmed.” He supports his theory both with the unreliability of sight and the work of nerves upon the brain, explaining that “In the uncertain light this would bear a resemblance to a human figure, especially to a man whose nerves were already somewhat shaken.” The crewmen, on the contrary, interpret all the events as signs of supernatural interference, even the sighting of an Arctic fox which does not venture near the ship, prompting the exclamation that “Yon puir beastie kens mair, ay, an' sees mair nor you nor me!” They have no doubt that “there is a curse upon the ship” and that they are “being detained in what they choose to call a haunted vessel.” Hence the crew have firmly decided that “something uncanny has been flitting round the ship” while the narrator is convinced that the dreary atmosphere combined with superstition has produced curious psychological and medical symptoms.

The one true enigma of the story is the captain, who presents evidence that does not seem to fully conform to either the superstitious crew or the scientific narrator. The medical student himself admits regarding the character of the captain that “the idea in my own mind is at best a vague and uncertain one. Several times I have thought that I grasped the clue which might explain it, but only to be disappointed by his presenting himself in some new light which would upset all my conclusions.” On the one hand, the captain appears to be “manly and resolute,” and has earned “the name for courage and coolness.” On the other hand, the narrator reports

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58 Doyle, 8.
59 Doyle, 10.
60 Doyle, 10.
61 Doyle, 19.
62 Doyle, 19.
63 Doyle, 10.
64 Doyle, 25.
65 Doyle, 4-5.
66 Doyle, 5.
67 Doyle, 12.
that he has “a curious way of twitching his limbs, which may arise from nervousness” and that sometimes he adopts “a look of fear” which “would spread and deepen until it imparted a new character to his whole countenance.” In his conversation with the narrator, the captain is revealed to be “remarkably well-read” and able to speak about “the nature of the soul and...the views of Aristotle and Plato upon the subject in a masterly manner.” According to the narrator, the captain “seems to have a leaning for metempsychosis and the doctrines of Pythagoras” and strong views on “the modern spiritualism.” This suggests that the captain is a learned and, to an extent a scientific man, adding philosophy to his mastery of mathematics needed for ship navigation. In contrast to this, the mysterious captain also at times appears to have “that wild look in his eyes which in a Highlander would mean that he was ‘fey’ – at least so our chief engineer remarked to me, and he has some reputation among the Celtic portion of our crew as a seer and expounder of omens.” The word “fey” has both the meaning of a visionary and a doomed person, marked by a foreboding of death or calamity. In addition to this, the captain refuses to countenance the narrator’s theory about nervousness and superstition, and treats the complaints seriously, prompting the narrator to say “I should have thought that he at least would have been above such vulgar delusions.” At the same time the captain is willing to seriously consider the question of his own sanity, asking the medical student “You couldn't prove me mad in a court of law, could you, now?” He wavers on the verge of seeing the apparition as a sign of impending mental breakdown, and discusses this with the narrator:

Are bad dreams signs of madness?

"Sometimes," I answered.

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68 Doyle, 5.
69 Doyle, 5.
70 Doyle, 24.
71 Doyle, 25.
72 Doyle, 7.
73 Doyle, 8.
74 Doyle, 16.
"What else? What would be the first symptoms?"

"Pains in the head, noises in the ears flashes before the eyes, delusions"

"Ah! what about them?" he interrupted. "What would you call a delusion?"

"Seeing a thing which is not there is a delusion."\(^{75}\)

That last definition seems to ignore all the complications connected with the unreliability of sight, and the problem of recognizing when what one sees is there and when it is not. The captain counters by saying "But she WAS there!"\(^{76}\) Thus he swings back and forth between appearing perfectly cool and rational, until something brings out what the narrator calls “all his latent lunacy in an exaggerated form.”\(^{77}\) As such, the captain, similar to the apparition itself, is an unreliable sign, since his behaviour and testimony lends itself in turns to the narrator’s interpretation and to that of the crew.

To complicate matters further, the narrator himself experiences things that somewhat shake his confidence in his theory. The entry in his diary immediately after the event starts in a hesitating tone, saying “I have gone through a very strange experience, and am beginning to doubt whether I was justified in branding everyone on board as madmen because they professed to have seen things which did not seem reasonable to my understanding.”\(^{78}\) However, he quickly recovers his footing and assures that it was “nothing very alarming – a mere sound” and that “reading it again in days to come, when I have shaken off all these associations, I should despise myself for having been so weak.”\(^{79}\) Similarly, when the captain’s odd behaviour reaches its climax, the narrator is determined to watch him, in case he attempted something harmful to himself or

\(^{75}\) Doyle, 17.
\(^{76}\) Doyle, 17.
\(^{77}\) Doyle, 27.
\(^{78}\) Doyle, 28.
\(^{79}\) Doyle, 29.
others. This means that he witnesses the same scene that prompts the captain to jump ship and
disappear into the night. He reports that

He was staring with an eager questioning gaze at what seemed to be a wreath
of mist, blown swiftly in a line with the ship. It was a dim, nebulous body,
devoid of shape, sometimes more, sometimes less apparent, as the light fell on
it. The moon was dimmed in its brilliancy at the moment by a canopy of
thinnest cloud, like the coating of an anemone. 80

The sight described by the narrator is fairly ambiguous, and could be easily interpreted as a
natural phenomenon. The captain clearly sees something much more defined than the narrator,
as he addresses his long-lost lover, and makes to follow the apparition. His encounters with the
ghost are the closest ones, however he is also the only one who does not openly describe what
he saw, leaving the narrator and the crew to their own conjectures. When the search party finally
finds the captain, he is frozen to death. The narrator adds that

As we came up some wandering puff of wind caught these tiny flakes in its
vortex, and they whirled up into the air, partially descended again, and then,
caught once more in the current, sped rapidly away in the direction of the sea.
To my eyes it seemed but a snow-drift, but many of my companions averred
that it started up in the shape of a woman, stooped over the corpse and kissed
it, and then hurried away across the floe. 81

Both the narrator and the crew see that which they are habitually conditioned to see, making it
unclear whether there was an actual apparition, or whether the captain did indeed succumb to
lunacy. The only direct witness is dead without giving his testimony, and buried at sea: “There
he shall lie, with his secret and his sorrows and his mystery all still buried in his breast, until
that great day when the sea shall give up its dead.” 82 The narrator concludes the “strange chain

80 Doyle, 37.
81 Doyle, 40.
82 Doyle, 45.
of evidence" with a much less authoritative tone, and a subdued note that he has “learned never to ridicule any man's opinion, however strange it may seem,” suggesting that he may have some doubts about the explanation that he previously stated with such confidence. The hesitation in the story is thus compounded both by the contradictory traits in the character of the captain, which do not directly support any of the authoritative statements on the subject that the story presents, and by the clear bias in each of the observers beside the captain.

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83 Doyle, 41.
84 Doyle, 40.
Chapter 4: The Figure of the Ghost

4.1 The purposeless ghost?

“Only one thing is certain about apparitions, namely this, that they do appear.”

Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (1894)

In the debate surrounding ghosts in the nineteenth century, it was not so much their existence that was called into question, as both sceptics and believers conceded that apparitions, or ghosts are occasionally seen. It was rather the question of the ghosts’ nature and purpose that was animating the discussion. Are they symptoms of medical problems? Are they actual souls, or just effigies of the living? Why do they manifest? In the past, ghosts were almost invariably understood as beings from another world that come to our world to serve a certain purpose, or to fulfil a mission. In medieval times, ghosts were clearly divided according to their aim and origin. Gwenfair Walters Adams states that “in simple terms, ghosts from purgatory came to ask for help and ghosts from hell, to warn. The help should be granted; the warnings should be heeded.” Other visions involved either saints, who came to help, or demons that needed to be defeated. This clear statement of purpose on the part of the ghost gradually became less and less pronounced, although as late as 1727, in *The History and Reality of Apparitions*, the author, later discovered to be Daniel Defoe, still divides apparitions according to their mission, saying “the evil spirit, devil like, comes to deceive, he is the father of lies; and comes to do hurt, he is a lover and the author of mischief. The good spirit is from God, the fountain of all good, and appears always for good and merciful purposes.” This notion was complicated in the nineteenth

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1 Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1894) 180-181.
century by testimonies in which the ghosts did not make their purpose clear, most notably in the spiritualist séances. Andrew Lang, in his 1894 work *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* accurately sums up the characteristics of the nineteenth century ghost, saying that while modern tales of 'levitation' and flighty furniture, of flying stones, of rappings, of spectral hands, of cold psychical winds, are exactly like the tales of old, a change, an observed change, has come over the ghost of the nineteenth century. Readers of the *Proceedings of the Psychical Society* will see that the modern ghost is a purposeless creature. He appears nobody knows why; he has no message to deliver, no secret crime to reveal, no appointment to keep, no treasure to disclose, no commissions to be executed, and, as an almost invariable rule, he does not speak, even if you speak to him. The recent inquirers, notably Mr. Myers, remark with some severity on this vague and meaningless conduct of apparitions, and draw speculative conclusions to the effect that the ghost, as the Scotch say, 'is not all there'.

The ghosts' appearing without a fixed and stated purpose made it even more difficult to assign a meaningful origin and reason to their manifestation. This further heightened the controversy surrounding them, as now they could quite easily be appropriated for any theory that the interpreter saw fit to assign to them.

Sir Alfred Russel Wallace, in *A Defence of Modern Spiritualism* maintains that “all the strange facts, denied by so many because they suppose them 'supernatural,' may be due to the agency of beings of a like mental nature to ourselves – who are in fact ourselves – but one step advanced on the long journey through eternity.” In his explanation, ghosts are no longer the ‘other,’ some supernatural, miraculous all-knowing entity but rather they are ‘us’. Therefore, ghosts are no longer viewed as a metaphysical authority, either coming to impart knowledge and help the mortals, or to injure and harm them. They are simply humans, in the next stage of evolution.

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4 Lang, 95.
This would explain why, apart from their existence, and the signs that they can provide of their presence, the ghosts do not have much to offer. Spiritualist phenomena like table-rapping, spirit-writing, playing musical instruments or levitating the furniture were viewed as ridiculous circus attractions by people like Thomas Henry Huxley, a biologist and prominent defender of Darwin’s theory of evolution. When asked by the London Dialectical Society to investigate the spiritualist phenomena, he declined, saying “supposing such phenomena to be genuine – they do not interest me. If anybody could endow me with the faculty of listening to the chatter of old women and curates in the nearest cathedral town, I should decline the privilege, having better things to do.” To him, ghosts were meaningless and irrelevant to science, since they could not make a meaningful contribution for the betterment of mankind.

Although the ghosts’ failure to act or explain their mission made them less connected with religion than in previous ages, they were by no means free of religious interpretation. Spiritualists like Catherine Crowe and Newton Crosland chose to view the apparitions as a proof of the existence of God and afterlife, as well as a warning to those who live unwisely. Crosland states that “they clearly demonstrate the individual immortality of the soul; the certainty of a future state corresponding to our deserts and conduct in this life [and] God's government of the world through the instrumentality of good and evil spirits…” while Crowe cautions that “At death, we enter upon a new course of life; and what that life shall be, depends upon ourselves.” Notwithstanding these protestations, even the spiritualist camp had to admit that “ghosts do not go about their business like other people.” Crowe mentions in The Night Side of Nature (1853) that for example “in cases of murder, instead of going to the nearest justice of peace or to the nearest relation of the deceased, a ghost addresses itself to somebody

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7 Crosland, 6.
8 Crowe. 148.
9 Crowe, 656.
who had nothing to do with the matter.”10 Similarly, many other attested ghost stories, or séance experiences that were presented as evidence for what Crowe describes as “shadowy [shapes] informed by an intelligent spirit,”11 have ghosts that seem equally meaningless as the apparitions described by sceptics like Edward Ferriar and Samuel Hibbert. In one such story, printed in T. M. Jarvis’s collection called *Accredited Ghost Stories* (1823), Reverend Ruddle, the minister of Launceston in Cornwall, relates a tale about the ghost of a woman who appears to the son of her neighbour. The disturbed youth confesses “she never speaks to me, but passeth by hastily, and always leaves the footpath to me, and she commonly meets me twice or three times in the breadth of the field.”12 Throughout the story the motivation of the spirit is unclear. It does not attempt to help or harm anyone and simply continues to exist. In the end, the reverend says the spirit spoke to him “in a voice neither very audible, nor intelligible,”13 but fails to mention the purport of the conversation, concluding by simply stating that “after a few words of each side it quietly vanished.”14 Thus the only thing that the reader learns about the spirit in the story is that it existed.

This puzzling behaviour of the spectre is further amplified in many fictional ghost stories in which the ghost does not speak and only functions as a visual clue, the meaning of which has to be interpreted by the person who sees it. The power dynamic in Victorian ghost stories therefore appears to be inverted. It is no longer the spirit coming with a message or a purpose to influence the lives of the mortals, or to have them do its bidding. In most cases the ghost’s behaviour is rather ambiguous, and the initiative is on the side of the person who witnesses the apparition. In stories such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s “The House and the Brain” (1859) and H.G. Wells’s “The Red Room” (1896) it is the narrator who actively seeks out the ghost, not to

10 Crowe, 656.
11 Crowe, 418.
13 Jarvis, 234.
14 Jarvis, 234.
prove his courage, but in order to investigate it. In stories like Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) and Lanoe Falconer’s “Cecilia de Nöel” (1891) the ghost needs the help of the humans, but is unable to ask for it directly, which makes it necessary for the observer to pinpoint the cause of its distress and take action as he or she deems necessary. In many stories the ghost seems to have very little influence on the proceedings of the plot. In Charles Dickens’s “To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt,” the ghost’s purpose appears to be clear – to see his murderer punished. Despite this, the apparition, although it does say a few words, does not present any evidence or information that is not already in possession of the court, and the agency is firmly on the side of the narrator, who decides to take action on behalf of the ghost. Similarly, in Amelia Edwards’s “Was It an Illusion?” the body of the murder victim is found because the lake caved in, which is explained to be a natural process, suggesting that the case would have been solved regardless of the apparition of the schoolboy. Even in stories where the ghost’s intent appears to be malicious, for example Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” (1872) or Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner” (1879) the victims appear to be the ones to take action and harm themselves, without any definitive assault on the part of the spirit.

This shows a tendency to depict the ghost as a visual, or sometimes auditory clue that needs to be interpreted by the observer, who is then the one to take action. This interpretation is never straightforward, and results in the doubt and hesitation that is at the centre of the ghost story. Such is the case of another supposedly real ghost sighting, narrated by Jung Stilling, and printed in Catherine Crowe’s The Night Side of Nature as evidence for the reality of apparitions. The story takes place in the Carolina College in Brunswick, where a college tutor named Dorrien, who recently died there, begins to haunt his colleague, Herr Hofer. The apparition takes to visiting Hofer in his bedroom, at first only “standing in front of a press which was no more than two steps from his bed.”15 When Hoffer fails to understand what it wants, “addressing it as an

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15 Crowe, 192.
evil spirit,” it starts to make “gestures with its head and hands,” and then returns repeatedly to “advance from the press to the bed and hang its head over him.” After further pantomimic communication, Hofer discovers that his colleague is in debt “to the tobacconist” and makes arrangements to settle it. This does not appease the spirit and it continues to appear to him, prompting Hofer to shout “If you want anything of me, say what it is, or give me an intelligible sign, and come here no more!” The ghost then presents “another sign, or symbol, which seemed to represent a picture with a hole in the middle, through which it thrust its head,” which is unintelligible as well. In the end “with considerable difficulty” a whole assembly of investigators finds that “Dorrien, just before his illness, had obtained, on trial, several pictures for a magic lantern, which had never been returned to their owner.” Not only is the ghost’s request completely trivial and human, but the spirit also communicates through ambiguous visual clues that are deciphered by its observers with the utmost difficulty. Thus, instead of a divine and instructive apparition, the story has a ghost that is unable to state its purpose clearly and that needs to be interpreted by the observers, who consequently spend a long time in hesitation about what it is they are supposed to do about the ghost.

In contrast to the detective story, another popular genre of the Victorian era, which presents a fantasy about the infallible detective, who is able to read visual clues which invariably lead him to the one correct solution of the case, ghost stories seem to be based on the idea that not only do the eyes deceive, but that what we see is ambiguous and can be interpreted in many different ways, and can even remain unexplained. This complicates the notion that truth is attainable, and that with the correct procedure, there can be no mistake as to the nature and meaning of the world around us. A perfect example of the subjectivity of interpretation is the above-mentioned

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16 Crowe, 192.
17 Crowe, 192.
18 Crowe, 193.
19 Crowe, 193.
20 Crowe, 193.
21 Crowe, 194.
story by Lanoe Falconer, “Cecilia de Nöel.” The story has multiple people encounter the ghost, and records their reactions. None of the witnesses can satisfactorily describe the ghost’s appearance, nor its expression; notwithstanding, they each give their own interpretation of what the ghost means. In each of them, the ghost induces doubts that are specifically related to their own perception of the world. Besides the effect of shaking any belief that can be shaken, the ghost does not have any mission towards the inhabitants of Weald Manor, and according to Cecilia, is rather in need of their help. Hence the focus is fully on the humans who encounter the ghost, and the apparition’s significance lies solely in its providing an impetus for them to question their lives. Another way in which the ghost causes hesitation is correctly identified by Tamás Bényei, who states that “the ghost frequently functions as the excess that prevents the property (often a big house) from going on the market, from entering the monetary circulation: unable to sell it or put it up for rent, the family are simply forced to keep it.”22 This is another example of the inaction caused by hesitation. Not only does the ghost cause doubt in those who encounter it, but it also prevents the owners from letting the house it haunts or taking any kind of action regarding it. The property’s usefulness is suspended much like the judgement of the person who observes the ghostly phenomena, and unless an action is taken, it remains that way. Similarly, the person needs to make a decision about what he or she believes before action is possible. The purpose of the ghost therefore seems twofold – to cause doubt by its existence and to cause hesitation by its undecipherable actions.

4.2 The modern approach to apparitions: “The House and the Brain”

An example of a very modern approach to the depiction of ghosts can be found in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s story “The House and the Brain”, first published in Blackwood’s Magazine in

22 Tamás Bényei, “Ghosts in the Age of Spectrality: The Irrelevance of Ghosts and Late Victorian Ghost Stories” Literature, Culture and the Fantastic: Challenges of the Fin de Siècle(s)(Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Rijeka, 2012) 8.
August 1859. “The House and the Brain” is a version that was revised and edited by Bulwer-Lytton from a longer version called “The Haunted and the Haunters,” which arguably is not a ghost story, since it removes all traces of hesitation by thoroughly explaining the events and even bringing the perpetrator into the story to explain himself. This means, according to Todorov, that it no longer belongs to the genre of the fantastic, but rather to that of the uncanny. In this story, as in some of his other works including Zanoni (1842) or A Strange Story (1862), Bulwer-Lytton attempted to blend science with occult phenomena like mesmerism and hypnotism in order to reconcile the ideas and provide a coherent system. J. Jeffrey Franklin argues that

> In [his struggle to rationalize spiritualism to science, science to spiritualism] he was representative of a complex, pervasive, but frequently unarticulated Victorian response to occult spirituality: a desperate longing to believe in the phenomena implicit in mesmerism and explicit in spiritualism combined with the scepticism that accompanied a growing conviction that science was now the ultimate truth-telling authority.²³

Bulwer-Lytton’s effort to include phenomena like thought-transference, mesmerism and apparitions under the heading of science can be viewed as an attempt to incorporate them into the accepted Victorian worldview and to provide safely rational explanations for them. It is a fortification against doubt and hesitation, as is shown by the narrator of the story, who proudly announces that “as I hold presence of mind, or what is called courage, to be precisely proportioned to familiarity with the circumstances that lead to it, so I should say that I had been long sufficiently familiar with all experiments that appertain to the marvellous.”²⁴ Therefore hesitation is combatted by familiarity, and preconceived explanation for what otherwise would

²⁴ Bulwer-Lytton, 11.
be a source of doubt. The way the ghosts are depicted in this story is representative of almost all the tendencies discussed in the previous section. Firstly, they are not the driving agency of the plot. The appearance of the ghosts in Bulwer-Lytton’s story can be compared to the appearance of symptoms of a disease. They serve as visual clues that the narrator uses to discover the human agency behind the events in the house, comparable to the physical evidence such as the letters and the portrait that he eventually discovers. Secondly, the apparitions are highly ambiguous. They do not speak or in any way communicate with the narrator, who is left to observe the interaction between them and draw his own conclusion. He witnesses scenes such as the following

The closet door to the right of the fireplace now opened, and from the aperture there came the form of an aged woman. In her hand she held letters – the very letters over which I had seen THE Hand close; and behind her I heard a footstep. She turned round as if to listen, and then she opened the letters and seemed to read; and over her shoulder I saw a livid face, the face as of a man long drowned – bloated, bleached, seaweed tangled in its dripping hair; and at her feet lay a form as of a corpse; and beside the corpse there cowered a child, a miserable, squalid child, with famine in its cheeks and fear in its eyes.  

This is a scene that is later explained when the narrator pieces together the story of the inhabitants of the house, however that story seems to be fairly irrelevant to solving the mystery of the house. The narrator explains that he considers ghosts to be “but ideas conveyed somehow or other (we have not yet discovered the means) from one mortal brain to another.” As such, he continues “the thing that most strikes us is the absence of what we hold to be soul – that is, of superior emancipated intelligence. These apparitions come for little or no object – they seldom speak when they do come; if they speak, they utter no ideas above those of an ordinary

25 Bulwer-Lytton, 15-16.
26 Bulwer-Lytton, 20.
person on earth." The ghosts he witnesses fit this definition perfectly, since they do not seem to have any message to impart, and they do not make any attempt at communication. Their only role in the story seems to be to implicitly confirm the story that we later learn from the owner of the house. The story itself is gathered from the letters found in the house and from further investigation, making the ghosts’ appearance unnecessary. The history is included by the narrator, although he does not seem to ascribe it much value. While this provides an explanation to some of the apparitions, there are also images and phenomena that are never explained, and which the narrator does not address, such as:

the bubbles of light again rose and fell, and in their disordered, irregular, turbulent maze, mingled with the wan moonlight. And now from these globules themselves, as from the shell of an egg, monstrous things burst out; the air grew filled with them: larvae so bloodless and so hideous that I can in no way describe them except to remind the reader of the swarming life which the solar microscope brings before his eyes in a drop of water – things transparent, supple, agile, chasing each other, devouring each other; forms like naught ever beheld by the naked eye. As the shapes were without symmetry, so their movements were without order. In their very vagrancies there was no sport; they came round me and round, thicker and faster and swifter, swarming over my head, crawling over my right arm, which was outstretched in involuntary command against all evil beings. Sometimes I felt myself touched, but not by them; invisible hands touched me.

These images are also spectral phenomena; nevertheless, they are not treated by the narrator as visual clues, and their significance is never pondered. This brings us back to the impossibility of a disinterested observer. Much like Dr Hesselius, the narrator has already decided on an explanation for the situation and fails to investigate anything that is not directly relevant to it.

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27 Bulwer-Lytton, 20.
28 Bulwer-Lytton, 16.
He is not alarmed by the touches of invisible hands, nor by the hand that snatches the letters from his night table, and focuses only on what he considers to be the cause of the disturbances:

It was a Darkness shaping itself forth from the air in very undefined outline. I cannot say it was of a human form, and yet it had more resemblance to a human form, or rather shadow, than to anything else. As it stood, wholly apart and distinct from the air and the light around it, its dimensions seemed gigantic, the summit nearly touching the ceiling…As I continued to gaze, I thought – but this I cannot say with precision – that I distinguished two eyes looking down on me from the height. One moment I fancied that I distinguished them clearly, the next they seemed gone; but still two rays of a pale – blue light frequently shot through the darkness, as from the height on which I half believed, half doubted, that I had encountered the eyes.  

This image is arguably the least defined of all the apparitions that the narrator encounters. As a ghost, it is rather meaningless since it does not communicate or show anything that would help the narrator identify its purpose. What he perceives, however, is that from this apparition emanates “immense and overwhelming Power opposed to my volition.” Since, according to his previously conceived theory, apparitions “must not be confounded with the true soul” he immediately concludes that the will he is contending with belongs to another human being. Fortunately, his theory also supplies a procedure that has to be applied in this case: “I was still equally conscious that if I gave way to fear I should be in bodily peril; and I concentrated all my faculties in the single focus of resisting stubborn will.” After the phenomena cease, whether through the effort of the narrator or of their own accord, several suspicious circumstances are revealed. The dog which the investigator brought with him to the house is found dead: “I imagined he had died of fright. But what was my surprise on finding that his neck was actually

29 Bulwer-Lytton, 13.
30 Bulwer-Lytton, 13.
31 Bulwer-Lytton, 20.
32 Bulwer-Lytton, 16.
broken. Had this been done in the dark? Must it not have been by a hand human as mine; must there not have been a human agency all the while in that room?”  

Another reason for doubt is that during the entire ordeal, both the candles and the fire go out, leaving the room in darkness except for moonlight. This not only calls to question the accuracy of the narrator’s perception, but also lends itself to the explanation that a person may have entered the room under the cover of the darkness, and that some of the phenomena may have been impostures. Furthermore, the servant that accompanied the narrator to the house is later found to have disappeared, leaving only a letter stating he left for Australia. The narrator comments that “This flight may perhaps warrant a suspicion that the man wished to go to Australia, and had been somehow or other fraudulently mixed up with the events of the night. I say nothing in refutation of that conjecture; rather, I suggest it as one that would seem to many persons the most probable solution of improbable occurrences,” but also again shows his bias by saying “My belief in my own theory remained unshaken.”  

The apparitions and other effects are dismissed by the narrator as “objectless, purposeless, puerile, frivolous,” and the focus is firmly on the human agency that he believes to be behind the events:

my persuasion is, that they originate in some brain now far distant; that that brain had no distinct volition in anything that occurred; that what does occur reflects but its devious, motley, ever-shifting, half-formed thoughts; in short, that it has been but the dreams of such a brain put into action and invested with a semi-substance. That this brain is of immense power, that it can set matter into movement, that it is malignant and destructive, I believe; some material force must have killed my dog; the same force might, for aught I know, have sufficed to kill myself, had I been as subjugated

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33 Bulwer-Lytton, 17.
34 Bulwer-Lytton, 18.
35 Bulwer-Lytton, 20.
by terror as the dog, had my intellect or my spirit given me no countervailing resistance in my will.\textsuperscript{36}

This theory is supported by the objects that are later discovered in a hidden room in the house. There is an odd device that seems to combine chemistry and occult science, “a saucer…filled with a clear liquid,—on that liquid floated a kind of compass, with a needle shifting rapidly round; but instead of the usual points of a compass were seven strange characters, not very unlike those used by astrologers to denote the planets.”\textsuperscript{37} It is not clear whether the effects of the device are magical or simply a result of a chemical compound, since it exudes an odour that “produced material effect on the nerves,”\textsuperscript{38} but when the contraption is broken the whole house stirs: “the walls shook to and fro.”\textsuperscript{39} There is also a portrait of a man whose appearance is reminiscent of the shadowy apparition which the narrator described as having “serpent eyes.”\textsuperscript{40} The countenance in the portrait also reminds him of “some mighty serpent transformed into man,”\textsuperscript{41} which suggests that he might be the perpetrator. However, the date on the back of the portrait is 1765 and the man in it is “somewhat advanced in middle life,”\textsuperscript{42} making it improbable that he is a “living human agency.”\textsuperscript{43} All these circumstances support, but do not prove the narrator’s theory. It could just as easily be argued that the gruesome history of the house may be a reason for actual souls of the inhabitants to remain within. This is supported by the words of the old woman who took part in the original events and later returned to live in the house: “I don’t mind them. I remember them many years ago, when I lived in this house, not as a servant; but I know they will be the death of me some day. I don’t care, – I’m old, and must die soon anyhow; and then I shall be with them, and in this house still.”\textsuperscript{44} In the end “the part of the

\textsuperscript{36} Bulwer-Lytton, 21.  
\textsuperscript{37} Bulwer-Lytton, 24.  
\textsuperscript{38} Bulwer-Lytton, 24.  
\textsuperscript{39} Bulwer-Lytton, 25.  
\textsuperscript{40} Bulwer-Lytton, 16.  
\textsuperscript{41} Bulwer-Lytton, 24.  
\textsuperscript{42} Bulwer-Lytton, 24.  
\textsuperscript{43} Bulwer-Lytton, 19.  
\textsuperscript{44} Bulwer-Lytton, 2.
house with the secret chamber over it [is] razed to the foundations”\textsuperscript{45} and the house ceases to
be haunted, which could mean that the link to the human who caused the phenomena is severed, but it could also mean that by destroying the part of the house connected with the crime committed in it, the ghosts are laid to rest. The origin and nature of the apparitions in the house remains ambiguous since they do not have an explicitly stated purpose and they are subject to the interpretation of the observer, who is the main focus of the story.

4.3 Ghosts among us: "The Signalman" and "To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt"

As we have already mentioned in the introduction, Tzvetan Todorov divides the themes of the fantastic literature into two categories: “themes connected to the ‘I’” which subsumes all themes connected to the perception, and “themes connected to the ‘you’” which groups themes connected to sexual desire, especially its unusual forms, such as perversions.\textsuperscript{46} As many other authors dealing with Victorian ghost stories have noted, the second group of themes seems to be peculiarly absent from them. Tamás Bényei notes that “they seem to be less rich in those kinds of repressed contents and anxieties of (late) Victorian society the search of which motivates much recent critical enthusiasm for the Gothic.”\textsuperscript{47} In terms of representing repressed sexual desires or anxieties, the Victorian ghosts seem to be rather flat. Expressed in the sarcastic tones of Lanoe Falconer’s sceptic, Aetherley:

\begin{quote}
the latest thing in ghosts is very quiet and commonplace. Rattling chains and blue lights, and even fancy dress, have quite gone out. And the people who see the ghosts are not even startled at first sight; they think it is a visitor, or a man come to wind the clocks. In fact, the chic thing for a ghost in these days is to be mistaken for a living person.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} Bulwer-Lytton, 25.  
\textsuperscript{46} Todorov, 103, 118.  
\textsuperscript{47} Bényei, 3.  
\textsuperscript{48} Falconer, 140.
Their resemblance to ordinary contemporary people makes it very difficult to interpret the
ghosts as expressions of Todorov’s “themes connected to the ‘you.’” However, it makes them
perfect to represent a different set of anxieties, those connected to perception, interpretation and
the possibility of ascertaining the truth. The apparitions’ failure to visually indicate their
belonging to another realm makes them both difficult to recognize on sight and uncomfortably
similar to the person who observes them. Thus the ghosts not only represent an inscrutable or
confusing visual evidence that casts doubt on the way in which we interpret the world around
us, but they also suggest the possibility that they are a part of the observer, in more than one
sense. Not only is there always the possibility that the ghost exists only in the observer’s mind,
but there is also the suggestion that, since, as Wallace claims ghosts “are in fact ourselves,”
the ghosts and the persons who witness them share a connection.

This idea is most evident in the last two ghost stories written by Charles Dickens – “To Be
Taken With a Grain of Salt” (All the Year Round, 1865) and “The Signal-Man” (All the Year
Round, 1866). The first story, later renamed “The Trial for Murder,” deals with a narrator who
seems to share a mental connection with the ghost of a murdered man seeking justice for his
killer. The narrator studies the report of the case in the newspaper with interest, reading it
“twice, if not three times” and afterwards experiences a strange vision:

when I laid down the paper, I was aware of a flash – rush – flow – I do not know what
to call it – no word I can find is satisfactorily descriptive – in which I seemed to see
that bedroom passing through my room, like a picture impossibly painted on a running
river. Though almost instantaneous in its passing, it was perfectly clear; so clear that
I distinctly, and with a sense of relief, observed the absence of the dead body from the
bed.

49 Todorov, 118.
50 Wallace, 45.
52 Dickens, 81-82.
The story gives no indication of whether this vision is accurate or not, leaving open the possibility that it originated in the imagination excited by repeatedly perusing the newspaper article. However, given the connection between the narrator and the ghost that is made clear later in the story, it is feasible to suggest that the narrator is seeing the setting of the crime through the eyes of the victim. The absence of the dead body could be due to the fact that the narrator is sharing the point of view of the victim, who later makes contact with him as a ghost. The first ghost-sighting is quite unremarkable, and the narrator initially mistakes the two apparitions he sees from the window for regular pedestrians. He observes that one of the men has “his right hand menacingly raised” and is surprised by “the singularity and steadiness of this threatening gesture in so public a thoroughfare” and “the more remarkable circumstance that nobody heeded it.”\(^\text{53}\) Thus, it is not the ghosts’ appearance, which could easily be confused with that of living persons, despite the paleness of the murder victim, but their behaviour as well as their singling-out of the narrator as they “both stare up at [him],”\(^\text{54}\) that fixes them in his memory. Independently of these events, a suspect is arrested and scheduled for trial. After some weeks, the ghost makes another appearance, this time in the narrator’s own bedroom. Interestingly, the servant who is present in the room does not see the ghost until the narrator happens to touch him, which reinforces the suggestion that there is some unique connection between the ghost and the narrator. The narrator notes, “I fully believe that he derived his impression in some occult manner from me at that instant.”\(^\text{55}\) The situation also lends itself to explanation through the science of mesmerism, which allows that ideas can be transferred from one brain to another, suggesting that the ghost is in fact a creation of the narrator. The narrator interprets the ghost’s efforts in the following way: “I came to the conclusion that on the first occasion it had sought to fasten itself upon my memory, and that on the second occasion it had

\(^{53}\) Dickens, 82.  
\(^{54}\) Dickens, 82.  
\(^{55}\) Dickens, 84.
made sure of being immediately remembered,” strengthening the suspicion that the ghost has some mission to him that requires him to be acquainted with it. When the summons comes for him to be the juryman in the upcoming trial, he does not seem to associate it with the appearance of the ghost, saying “For a day or two I was undecided whether to respond to this call, or take no notice of it. I was not conscious of the slightest mysterious bias, influence, or attraction, one way or other…Ultimately I decided, as a break in the monotony of my life, that I would go.”

He also states that he only “think[s]” he did not know the trial was for the murder that he read about in the papers, leaving open the possibility that he in fact had some preconception about the case. When the murderer is brought out, the narrator recognizes him as “the first of the two men who had gone down Piccadilly.” At the same time, the murderer seems to recognize the narrator and demands him to be challenged, although he can give no rational reason for it.

Throughout the trial, the ghost appears to the narrator and to anyone that he touches. The ghost does not interfere with the proceedings of the court, nor does it present any evidence that is not already known. The narrator notes that “whenever a knot of my brother jurymen laid their heads together, I saw the head of the murdered man among theirs. Whenever their comparison of notes was going against him, he would solemnly and irresistibly beckon to me.” Thus the narrator acts as a proxy to the ghost in convincing the members of the jury to vote guilty, making the ghost’s case his own. Attempts to similarly communicate with other people are not observed by them, although there is “invariably…some trepidation or disturbance on their part.”

This assertion is ambiguous at best, since the trepidation can be a consequence of attempting to pose false testimony, or defending an invalid argument, such as that “the deceased might have cut

56 Dickens, 85.
57 Dickens, 85-86.
58 Dickens, 86.
59 Dickens, 88.
60 Dickens, 91.
61 Dickens, 92.
his own throat.”62 To the narrator “It seemed…as if it were prevented by laws to which I was not amenable, from fully revealing itself to others, and yet as if it could, invisibly, dumbly and darkly, overshadow their minds.”63 Nevertheless it is the narrator who takes initiative on behalf of the ghost to convince his fellow jurymen to pass the guilty verdict. Finally, the convicted murderer confesses that “I knew I was a doomed man when the Foreman of my Jury came into the box. My Lord, I knew he would never let me off because, before I was taken, he somehow got to my bedside in the night, woke me, and put a rope round my neck.”64 This completely erases the already shaky distinction between the narrator and the ghost, showing just as the ghost of the victim appeared to the narrator in a bid for justice, the narrator unwittingly appeared to the murderer, prefiguring his condemnation. As always, there remains the possibility of another explanation; however, the suggestion is that, far from being a scientifically explainable anomaly, a ghost is a state of being that may already unconsciously exist in every human.

The same suggestion is even more pronounced in Dickens’s final ghost story, “The Signal-Man.” The story starts with the exclamation “Halloa! Below there!”65 innocently uttered by the narrator, who, out of self-professed curiosity, seeks to acquaint himself with the signalman. The signalman reacts in a peculiar way, as if he did not understand the words, that to the narrator clearly indicate that someone is above him: “instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting nearly over his head, he turned himself about and looked down the Line.”66 This reaction, we later learn, is prompted by the fact that he has heard the exact same words from the apparition that manifests itself to him at the mouth of the tunnel. This strange connection of the narrator with the ghost is revealed in the ending of the story; however, it is foreshadowed from the beginning. Descending to the trench, the narrator notes that “So little

62 Dickens, 92.
63 Dickens, 93.
64 Dickens, 95.
65 Dickens, 7.
66 Dickens, 7.
sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world.”67 This dovetails with his first impression of the signalman: “The monstrous thought came into my mind as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit, not a man,” which is, however, quickly amended to mean something different when the narrator adds “I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind,”68 making it seem like the man’s ghostly appearance to the eyes of the narrator was a sign of sickness rather than otherworldliness. The suspicion of ghostliness is mutual, and the narrator, in an effort to explain his purpose, reassures the signalman that “In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life, and who, being at last set free, had a newly-awakened interest in these great works.”69 This remark can be read in two ways: either the narrator has literally been freed from some engagement and as such has time to admire the technical wonders of the railway, or, in the light of the narrator’s inexplicable connection to the ghost, it could be read as a statement of someone who freed his mind from its narrow confines and widened his influence above the limits of mere mortals. However, the suggestion is very faint and when the signalman asks directly whether he had seen the narrator before at the mouth of the tunnel, he answers obliviously: “My good fellow, what should I do there? However, be that as it may, I never was there, you may swear.”70 During the conversation, the signalman “twice broke off with a fallen colour, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring…and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel. On both of those occasions, he came back to the fire with the inexplicable air upon him which I had remarked, without being able to

67 Dickens, 9.
68 Dickens, 10.
69 Dickens, 9-10.
70 Dickens, 11.
define, when we were so far asunder.” He promises to explain his strange behaviour at the next visit and parts with another question:

What made you cry 'Halloa! Below there!' to-night?"

"Heaven knows," said I. "I cried something to that effect – "

"Not to that effect, sir. Those were the very words. I know them well."

"Admit those were the very words. I said them, no doubt, because I saw you below."

"For no other reason?"

"What other reason could I possibly have!"

"You had no feeling that they were conveyed to you in any supernatural way?"

"No." The narrator does not remember the proper wording, suggesting that he used the words unconsciously, and without any idea as to their significance to the signalman. He also refuses that there was some foreign influence that made him choose these words, meaning that they originated from himself. The next night, before the signalman explains the source of his anxiety and tells the narrator about the spectre that seems to be a presage of tragedy, he again emphasizes the connection between the narrator and the ghost:

“I took you for someone else yesterday evening. That troubles me.”

“That mistake?”

“No. That someone else.”

“Who is it?”

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71 Dickens, 13.
72 Dickens, 14-15.
“I don’t know.”

“Like me?”

"I don't know. I never saw the face. The left arm is across the face, and the right arm is waved. Violently waved. This way.”

I followed his action with my eyes, and it was the action of an arm gesticulating with the utmost passion and vehemence: "For God's sake clear the way!"\(^{73}\)

The narrator interprets the gesture that puzzles the signalman without the slightest hesitation, and even connects a verbal exclamation to it. To the signalman, the ghost is an unintelligible sign: “what troubles me so dreadfully, is the question, what does the spectre mean?”\(^{74}\) He wants to act on the warning that has twice proved to be correct, but is unable to decipher the nature of the tragedy that is to take place, saying “But surely this is a cruel haunting of me. What can I do?”\(^{75}\) He is suspended in inaction due to lack of knowledge, and his attempts to investigate are not met with success. The narrator himself is also experiencing the feeling of hesitation on a different count:

But, what ran most in my thoughts was the consideration how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure? I had proved the man to be intelligent, vigilant, painstaking, and exact; but how long might he remain so, in his state of mind? Though in a subordinate position, still he held a most important trust, and would I (for instance) like to stake my own life on the chances of his continuing to execute it with precision?\(^{76}\)

In true Victorian fashion, he finally decides not to act on the situation until he gathers more data: “I ultimately resolved to offer to accompany him (otherwise keeping his secret for the present) to the wisest medical practitioner we could hear of in those parts, and to take his

\(^{73}\) Dickens, 15-16.  
\(^{74}\) Dickens, 21.  
\(^{75}\) Dickens, 22.  
\(^{76}\) Dickens, 24.
opinion.” This proves to be a mistake, since he learns the next morning that the signalman met his demise, presumably because he was attempting to gather data of his own, examining the tunnel, and did not heed the familiar warning, which he was accustomed to hear from the apparition. In recounting the accident, the engine driver reveals that the exact words that he called out “included, not only the words which the unfortunate Signalman had repeated to me as haunting him, but also the words which I myself – not he – had attached, and that only in my own mind, to the gesticulation he had imitated.” This ending note solidifies the suggestion, perpetuated from the beginning, that there is some strange connection between the narrator and the ghost, and that the narrator might even, unconsciously to himself, be the ghost attempting to warn the signalman. This would also explain the narrator’s strange compulsion to go down and meet the signalman, and his intention to remove him from duty, which is ultimately foiled by the inability to act on his feelings of foreboding. Having the ghost be connected with, or possibly a part of, the narrator is in keeping with the topic of subjectivity that permeates Victorian ghost stories. Not only is vision not objective, and the seen does not have a fixed meaning, but the ghost may not even be a separate entity to be observed. In some stories the ghost effectively ceases to be an independent phenomenon and becomes connected to the person who witnesses it in a way that makes it difficult to examine them separately, completely deconstructing the illusion that everything can be comprehended using objective methods of investigation.

77 Dickens, 24.
78 Dickens, 27.
Chapter 5: Resolving the Ghost Story

5.1 “Tenoned and morticed:” the practical decision to believe

The endings of the ghost stories discussed can be taken as illustrations of Horatio Brown’s statement that “It does not much matter what a man believes; but for power and happiness he must believe something – he must have his foot ‘tenoned and morticed’ somewhere, not planted on forever shifting sand heap.”¹ The feeling of doubt cannot be perpetuated, and for the sake of man’s sanity and productivity he needs to choose to adhere to one theory or another, or else refuse to concern himself with the question. This seems to hold true both for the ongoing debate about the nature of ghosts, and for the ghost stories themselves. We have already noted in the previous chapter that hesitation can be dispelled through reliance on precedent and authority instead of the evidence presented. In order to have closure, many ghost story characters, without being able to ascertain the truth on the basis of evidence, simply decide to adhere to the theory that is the most practical to them. This is in keeping with the strain of thought represented by John Ruskin, who maintains that “an affected Thinker, who supposes his thinking of any other importance than as it tends to work, is about the vainest kind of person that can be found in the occupied classes.”² Therefore the only things worth thinking about are those that have a potential to be useful for the betterment of mankind. The same idea can be applied to the ghost story – the only solution worth accepting is that which helps the character shed the paralysis of doubt and continue with his or her life.

It is interesting to note that, in the debate between the adherents of spiritualism, and those who rejected the idea of ghosts as intelligent beings, this same argument is used by both sides. Since the evidence is not conclusive on either side, and neither side can give an irrefutable explanation

¹ Brown, 318.
as to the nature of apparitions, the proponents of each theory appeal to their readers’ practicality. Sir Alfred Russel Wallace attempts to convince his reader that there can be no doubt about the existence of spirits, and that they invariably follow the principles of the science of spiritualism. At the same time, despite “the overwhelming force of the facts,” he feels obliged to add that spiritualism is in fact the practical thing to believe in, since it is “an incentive to higher education,” has “a really practical bearing on the present as well as the future condition of men,” and constitutes “a great moral agency.” It seems that Wallace’s final argument has nothing to do with the truth of the theory, and much to do with its potential to improve those that decide to believe it. Similarly, Bourchier Wrey Saville, who takes a religious standpoint on the question of ghosts, maintains that “The thought that – we are watched by pure and loving eyes, the possibility that those whose memories we cherish and revere – dear, departed ones, who are not lost but gone before – are still with us, interesting themselves in our welfare, guarding us from evil, and strengthening us in the path of duty, cannot surely fail to exercise upon us an influence of the most salutary kind.” Thus once again it is the salutary effect the belief has on the conduct of men, rather than irrefutable evidence of its truth, that should induce readers to put their faith in it.

William Howitt specifically mentions the usefulness of conceding to the existence of ghosts as a means of counteracting doubt, which he calls “the great psychologic malady of the time.” He maintains that there is a mass of evidence from every age and people, even down to our own times, as recorded by their greatest and most accredited authors, so overwhelming, that we are thereby reduced to this dilemma;—either to reject this universal evidence, by which we inevitably reduce all history to a gigantic fiction, and destroy every appeal to its

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3 Wallace, 14.  
4 Wallace, 59.  
5 Saville, 6.  
decision on any question whatever; or to accept it, in which case we find ourselves standing face to face with a principle of the most authoritative character for the solution of spiritual enigmas and the stemming of the fatal progress of infidelity.\(^7\)

Howitt attempts to present the conflict in the light of practicality. By rejecting the existence of ghosts, the reader will bring the entire history of mankind to doubt and consequently lose any positive progress or lessons that arose out of it. By deciding that ghosts are indeed real, he will not only gain a reliable solution for hitherto unexplainable phenomena, but will also defeat doubt. Howitt insists that his theory “presents an impassable barrier to the ultimate and dreary object of scepticism, and renders easy the acceptance of the marvellous events of the sacred Scriptures”\(^8\) and as such it is beneficial for any man who does not want to be encumbered with insecurities and questions about his faith. Therefore, the reader is presented with a choice to either bring even more doubt and insecurity to his life, or to accept the principle that will neatly solve all the mysteries and leave his faith vindicated and his mind free for practical concerns.

However, in other authoritative texts the conflict is presented in a completely opposite way. While the proponents of the existence of ghosts strove to prove the practicality of their theories, the other camp dismissed the idea of ghosts as sentient beings precisely because of their uselessness to any constructive endeavour. Sir Walter Scott, in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* states that “tales of ghosts and demonology are out of date at forty years and upwards,”\(^9\) implying that mature people have little time to consider matters that do not bear practical impact on their lives. He adds that “the most ordinary mechanic has learning sufficient to laugh at the figments which in former times were believed by persons far advanced in the deepest knowledge of the age,”\(^10\) removing the belief in ghosts not only to a young age, but to

\(^7\) Howitt, 6.
\(^8\) Howitt, 6.
\(^9\) Scott, 337.
\(^10\) Scott, 337.
a different age altogether from the enlightened nineteenth century, where active and useful contribution to the society is what one should strive for. On December 17, 1874, *The Boston Herald* wrote the following with regard to spiritualism:

Let Spiritualism produce some idea, utter some word, or perform some deed, which will have novelty, and yet be of manifest value to the human race, and it will make good its claims to our serious consideration. But it has not done this. For nearly thirty years it has been before the world in its present shape, and in all that time, with all its asserted command of earthly and superterrestrial knowledge, it has never done an act, or breathed a syllable, or supplied an idea which had any value as a contribution to the welfare of the race, or to its stock of knowledge.¹¹

The author of the article also avails himself of the argument of practicality and maintains that there are no tangible or spiritual benefits to the science of spiritualism, and that as such, it is irrelevant to mankind.

In addition to this, several authors also pointed out the harmful effects of the belief in communication with spirits, citing examples of nervous breakdowns and insanity resulting from overexposure to spiritualist beliefs, as well as cases of immoral behaviour. Uriah Smith, in his 1896 book *Modern Spiritualism* argues that despite spiritualist’s claims about the social and moral benefits of their creed, “homes have been ruined, families scattered, characters blighted; while insanity and suicide have been the fate, or the last resort, of too many of its victims.”¹² Andrew Lang sums up the situation in *Cock Lane and Common Sense* pointing out that “science constantly, and with excellent reason, resists to the last gasp every attempt to recognise the existence of a new law, which, after all, can apparently do little for the benefit of mankind, and may conceivably do something by no means beneficial.”¹³ While it is commendable that the

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¹² Smith, 109.

¹³ Lang, 304-305.
scientists are concerned with the moral and practical advancement of mankind, refusing to investigate claims that do not tally with their own ideas is hardly scientific. Therefore the accusation levelled against the spiritualists of wishing to believe that which suits their wants and needs can just as easily be applied to scientists who as Lang puts it “denounce all investigation of the abnormal phenomena of which history and rumour are so full, because the research may bring back distasteful beliefs, and revive the ‘ancestral tendency’ to superstition.”

Assent to one side or another of the argument seems to be a decision based on the practical impact on individual lives as well as the whole of mankind, rather than careful consideration of amassed evidence.

Similar attitudes are reflected in many of the ghost stories, in which the protagonists have decided beforehand on what they want to believe, and they strive to maintain their preconceptions in the face of evidence that, if examined dutifully, may point to the contrary. Such seems to be the case of Dr Hesselius in the “Green Tea” and the narrator in “The House and the Brain,” who both consciously decide to adhere to their own theory, seeking only such evidence as supports it, and leaving aside anything that does not. In H.G. Wells’s “The Red Room” the protagonist claims that he wants to investigate the ghost that is supposedly haunting one of the rooms in the castle where he is staying. From the beginning it is clear that he has a tendency to interpret ghosts in a symbolic rather than literal sense. He considers the staff of the castle “to belong to another age, an older age, an age when things spiritual were indeed to be feared, when common sense was uncommon, an age when omens and witches were credible, and ghosts beyond denying.” Not only does he displace ghosts to the past, where they are safely contained and irrelevant to the present, but ascribes to the housekeepers the term “spectral,” meaning that “the cut of their clothing, fashions born in dead brains; the ornaments

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14 Lang, 306.
15 Wells, 291.
and conveniences in the room about them even are ghostly—the thoughts of vanished men, which still haunt rather than participate in the world of to-day.”¹⁶ This suggests that the narrator only believes in ghosts in the sense of the past haunting the present, but by no means as intelligent beings capable of action. The house staff on the other hand are firmly convinced that the red room is truly haunted, due to its history beginning with “the tale of a timid wife and the tragic end that came to her husband's jest of frightening her”¹⁷ and continuing with the death of “the young Duke” in “his gallant attempt to conquer the ghostly tradition of the place.”¹⁸ After the events of the night, which end with the narrator battering himself unconscious in fright, the narrator does not pause to consider the events that he witnessed in the room, and simply adheres to his previous belief of ghosts existing only in the figurative sense. He admits that “the room is haunted” but what he means is not the ghost of “the old earl” or “the young countess who was frightened,”¹⁹ as the denizens of the castle suggest. His idea of a ghost is the oppressive fear that assails one in the dark and unknown surroundings, erasing his rationality—not a spectral visitor, but the psychological effect. In the same vein, the old housekeeper instantly interprets his words according to his own belief, giving his ghost the names “Black Fear,” “a curse” and “The Power of Darkness.”²⁰ Hence neither side really stops to consider any evidence that would be contrary to their preconceived notions. The reader is the only party prone to remain in doubt, since the story gives evidence both for and against either of the theories.

An even more striking example of the tendency to decide on the basis of convenience and one’s own preconceptions rather than evidence is Amelia B. Edwards’s “The New Pass.” In the beginning, the narrator proudly announces “I believe in very little that I do not hear and see for myself.”²¹ He presents himself as a rational observer, unbiased by fanciful mind or superstition.

¹⁶ Wells, 291.
¹⁷ Wells, 292.
¹⁸ Wells, 292.
¹⁹ Wells, 295.
²⁰ Wells, 295.
²¹ Edwards, 74.
However, it soon becomes clear that far from objectively considering the evidence of his own eyes, the narrator has blind faith in the writings of Hibbert, Ferriar and Scott. Despite his “habit of incredulity,” he steadfastly ignores the overwhelming evidence that speaks against the explanation through the theory of apparitions. There is very little in that theory that could explain why he sees the exact likeness of his friend’s brother, who he never met, or why he sees an apparition when, according to himself he “felt well – never better; my head cool – my mind clear – my pulse regular.” Even more difficult to explain is the fact that the ghost’s warning proves to be true and the tunnel collapses and the narrator himself admits that “had we gone on, as we doubtless should have gone on but for the delay consequent upon my illusion, we should most probably have been in the heart of the tunnel at the time of the explosion, and not one left to tell the tale.” In the light of this evidence, the conclusion that the narrator draws is shown to be very much arbitrary: “I do not believe, and I have made up my mind never to believe – in ghosts.” This statement is, perhaps unknowingly, an admission that the narrator’s opinion is based on conscious decision to believe one thing over another, rather than on irrefutable evidence. He has made up his mind to ignore anything that would lead him to concede that ghosts indeed exist. In doing so, the narrator makes a practical decision to believe that which will not challenge his outlook on life, since in his opinion, believing in ghosts is a sign of mental infirmity: “I would never disbelieve in hallucinations again. To that I made up my mind; but as for ghosts…pshaw! How could any sane man…believe in ghosts?” And as in the previously discussed cases, the reader is left in doubt as to the credibility of the narrator’s neat solution.

22 Edwards, 74.
23 Edwards, 83.
24 Edwards, 85.
25 Edwards, 85.
26 Edwards, 83.
5.2 Dealing with hesitation: "Cecilia de Nöel"

The various ways in which one can solve the conundrum of ghosts and apparitions are dramatized by Lanoe Falconer, in her story “Cecilia de Nöel,” published in 1891 after the success of her novel Mademoiselle Ixe. The story introduces a narrator who is the epitome of hesitation, as he investigates the ghost sightings in his friend’s house. The story itself is an occasionally ironic catalogue of all the possible reactions to the supernatural. The narrator’s best friend Aetherley, whose very name evokes the theories of the invisible luminiferous ether, declares that “there is no revelation but that of science”\(^\text{27}\) He uses the word “revelation”\(^\text{28}\) which is more reminiscent of religion than of science, and proceeds to qualify his statement, saying “this revelation completely satisfies all reasonable desires,”\(^\text{29}\) suggesting that he has simply decided not to inquire any further than what he is told by science. What is more, despite the fact that he disdains faith as “a vice”\(^\text{30}\) and insists that “doubt, obstinate and almost invincible doubt, is the virtue we must now cultivate,”\(^\text{31}\) he does not seem to have any doubts about the revelations of science. Ironically, when explaining that “So far from taking anything on trust, you must refuse to accept any statement whatsoever till it is proved so plainly you can't help believing it whether you like it or not…,”\(^\text{32}\) he uses the example of a “theorem,”\(^\text{33}\) which is an assertion that has been proven on the basis of previously established statements, or even axioms (which in turn are statements generally accepted without proof). Therefore, what Aetherley considers a solid base for belief is not something that he has direct and personal proof of. He indulges the vice of faith when he chooses to trust in authority and in the plausibility of previously proved

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\(^{28}\) Falconer, 1.

\(^{29}\) Falconer, 1.

\(^{30}\) Falconer, 4.

\(^{31}\) Falconer, 5.

\(^{32}\) Falconer, 4.

\(^{33}\) Falconer, 5.
or stated facts, any one of which could conceivably be incorrect. Aetherley does not seem to be aware of the irony in his statements, not even when he praises the impersonal and mechanical laws of nature, saying “fair play and no favour!” to the narrator who suffered a crippling injury that leaves him in pain and unable to participate in many activities, making him a living proof that life is not fair.

The first ghost sighting, experienced by Mrs Mallet the cook, turns out to be the result of superstition and excitement, which perfectly fits the formula for a hackneyed ghost story, such as the one Aetherley gleefully provides:

Work yourself up into a great state of terror and excitement, in the first place; in the next, procure one companion, if not more, as credulous and excitable as yourself; go at a late hour and with a dim light to a place where you have been told you will see something supernatural; steadfastly and determinedly look out for it, and – you will have your reward.35

This tongue-in-cheek description is compounded by a comment from Castleman, which seems to be a reference to Le Fanu’s “Green Tea”: “It is all along of this tea-drinking. We did not have this bother when the women took their beer regular. These teetotallers have done a lot of harm. They ought to be put down by Act of Parliament.”36 The doctor who is called in to look at the distraught cook simply states that “it is less common than other forms of feverishness, but will probably yield to the same remedies.”37 His is the stance of the medical science, which considers the ghost simply one of the symptoms of a disease. The doctor does not show the least hesitation, since he has managed to incorporate the ghost into the framework of his profession, and as such it holds no mystery for him.

34 Falconer, 3.
35 Falconer, 37.
36 Falconer, 54.
37 Falconer, 45.
When my patient tells me he hears bells ringing in his ear, or feels the ground swaying under his feet, I believe him implicitly, though I know nothing of the kind is actually taking place. The ghost, so far, belongs to the same class as the other experiences, that it is a symptom – it may be of a very trifling, it may be of a very serious, disorder.\(^{38}\)

The narrator, who is particularly troubled by the question of the afterlife, inquires further, and gets the cynical answer that “One's best hope must be that the whole miserable business ends with death.”\(^{39}\) He seems to find comfort in living as fulfilling a life as he can, saying, “I have tastes which I can gratify, work which I keenly enjoy. Whether the tastes are worth gratifying or the work worth doing I cannot say. At least they act as an anodyne to self-consciousness; they help me to forget the farce in which I play my part.”\(^{40}\) His best defence against feeling the pointlessness of his existence is to remain active. This life philosophy is perfected by Lady Aetherley, who, far from actively contributing to the society, simply focuses on her own comfort. Lyndsay muses on her complete indifference to a question that plagues him daily:

That a ghost should venture into Atherley's neighbourhood was less amazing than that it should continue to exist in his wife's presence, so much more fatal than his eloquence to all but the tangible and the solid. Her orthodoxy is above suspicion, but after some hours of her society I am unable to contemplate any aspects of life save the comfortable and the uncomfortable: while the Universe itself appears to me only a gigantic apparatus especially designed to provide Lady Atherley and her class with cans of hot water at stated intervals, costly repasts elaborately served, and all other requisites of irreproachable civilisation.\(^{41}\)
Lady Aetherley’s attitude is a parody of complete anti-intellectualism, a stance that discounts as irrelevant anything that is not directly related to the practical aspects of life. Nevertheless, none of the above mentioned characters actually witness the ghost.

The effect of the ghost sightings on each of those who witness it, with the exception of Cecilia, is to make them doubt their beliefs and their way of life. Mrs Mostyn tells a story in which the ghost makes her see the futility of “the whirl of worldly occupations and interests and amusements in which I was so engrossed,” and to turn to faith. Canon Vernade, a high official in the church, who just that morning delivered a brilliantly crafted sermon on “the contrast between the man of this world, with his heart fixed upon its pomps, its vanities, its honours, and the believer indifferent to all these, esteeming them as dross merely compared to the heavenly treasure, the one thing needful,” experiences a different kind of doubt. His ghost experience ends with him “murmuring to himself familiar verses of prayer and psalm and gospel, as if he sought therewith to banish some haunting fear, to quiet some torturing suspicion” and then crying to the narrator “in tones more heart-piercing than ever startled the great congregations in church or cathedral – ‘What if it were all a delusion, and there be no Father, no Saviour?’” Mr Austyn, the young parson, who is singled out by the narrator as a man of earnest faith, “solemn with an awe as rapt as if he verily stood before the throne of Him he called upon, and felt Its glory beating on his face,” is also subjected to the haunting. His reaction is “to be holding it at bay all the time with a great strain of the will, and, of course, [he hesitates before adding], in virtue of a higher power.” He does not want to see the ghost or to discover its secret, saying “I was not looking at it all this time – on the contrary, my hands were

42 Falconer, 75.
43 Falconer, 93.
44 Falconer, 108.
45 Falconer, 108.
46 Falconer, 92-3.
47 Falconer, 130.
clasped across my closed eyes.”

What he does manage to see, he takes as the confirmation of his creed, saying “there is no possible doubt what that was. Its face, as I tell you, was a revelation of evil – evil and its punishment. It was a lost soul.”

He ends the conversation with urging the narrator to accept the Christian faith, if only because it is “prudent” to acquiesce to the only voice “that threatens, as well as invites.”

Austyn’s faith is shown to be a conscious decision, and once again the narrator is not given a satisfactory answer to his dilemma. The next person to encounter the ghost is Mrs Molyneux – a sensual and gossipy lady, who eagerly explains to the group her latest discovery in religion, saying “it only declares that it is worse than useless to try and think of Him, far less pray to Him – because it is simply impossible. And that is quite scientific and philosophical, is it not?”

These are the tenets of a rationalist faith, propounded by Charles William Wooldridge in *The Missing Sense and the Hidden Things Which it Might Reveal* (1887) where he states that “the imperfection is in our physical organization and not in the organization of the universe, which prevents our having exact and minute knowledge at will of things distant, intangible, and invisible to us now.”

However, this neat philosophy also crumbles when confronted with the ghost, and Mrs Molyneux is rendered listless and miserable. She says:

I used to be so contented with it all – its pleasures, its little triumphs, even its gossip;
and what I called my aspirations I satisfied with what was nothing more than phrases.
And now I have found my real self, now I am awake, I want much more, and there is nothing – only a great silence, a great loneliness like that in the face. And the theories

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48 Falconer, 129.
49 Falconer, 134.
50 Falconer, 136.
51 Falconer, 136.
52 Falconer, 148-49.
I talked about are no comfort anymore; they are just what pretty speeches would be to a person in torture.\(^54\)

Once again the ghost brings hesitation, and the fear that comes with realizing that there is possibly no way to discover the truth of the matter. It is the kind of pain and dread that has been plaguing the narrator throughout the story. However, while the other characters either consciously decide what to believe and refuse to question it, like Aetherley and Mr. Austyn, or they leave the place somewhat shaken, but going back to their life like Canon Vernade, the narrator remains in the house and puzzles over the question which he cannot in good conscience answer. He says “I heard the lessons of the last few days repeated: witness after witness rose and gave his varying testimony; and when, before the discord and irony of it all, I bitterly repeated Pilate’s question, the smile on that dead face would rise before me, and then I hoped again.”\(^55\) The only hope he has is the face of a dead workman, that in life was “so unpicturesque, so unwinning, to shallow sight so unpithetic,”\(^56\) but in death became “transfigured, glorified, by that smile of ineffable and triumphant repose.”\(^57\) He never sees the face of the ghost, or the countenance that inspires all those who saw it with fear and doubt, and this is the closest to the mystery of death that he can see with his own eyes.

The last visitor who witnesses the ghost is the eponymous Cecilia de Nöel, whose name also has a whiff of irony about it, as it combines the Latin _caecus_, meaning blind, and the French word for Christmas, which, apart from its association with ghost stories, also has connotations of miracles and Christian faith. Her ghost story, same as the others, is open to both supernatural and natural explanation, however what is remarkable is that she is the only one who shows no hesitation at all, and concludes that the ghost is in need of help, saying, “Oh, why do you look

\(^{54}\) Falconer, 164.
\(^{55}\) Falconer, 154.
\(^{56}\) Falconer, 99.
\(^{57}\) Falconer, 142.
at me like that? Tell me what I shall do.”58 In her story, she lays the ghost to rest by embracing it and showing it her faith. It says “It is enough; now I know what God is!”59 and she ends her account by saying “I have a strong feeling that I have been able to help it, and that it will trouble you no more.”60 Although the narrator is not given an explanation or an answer to his question, he is overjoyed by “the miracle of her existence,”61 in awe of a woman who is able to live without the slightest doubt. Cecilia’s honest faith is more miraculous and inexplicable than the ghost-sightings, and it renders even Aetherley “silent.”62 Cecilia is the only character who truly has no doubt about her stance, and is not simply countenancing one theory or other through decision rather than conviction. In the Victorian world this makes her even rarer than the ghost.

58 Falconer, 189.
59 Falconer, 194.
60 Falconer, 194.
61 Falconer, 197.
62 Falconer, 197.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 The outcome of the discussion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate Victorian ghost stories in the light of two claims. The first one is the claim of Dani Cavallaro that “narratives of darkness evoke a universe of taboos in which the non-things which culture represses are brought to the foreground. In pulling to the surface occluded realms, those stories demonstrate that fantasy is not outside social reality but actually a constellation of social reality in inverted form.”¹ If this applies, it means that ghost stories reflect the anxieties that were current in the Victorian age but did not find their way into the works of serious literature. The second goal was to consider the structural organization and aim of Victorian ghost stories in connection with the genre of the fantastic as defined by Tzvetan Todorov, which seems to be uniquely suitable to the focus of the stories, and which I argue is different from that of their generic predecessor, the Gothic novel. Todorov’s three criteria for the fantastic genre are that “[first], the text must oblige the reader…to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character…Third, the reader must…reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.”²

The first point to consider is Todorov’s definition. The Victorian ghost stories discussed are mostly set in locations that retain some traditional Gothic tropes; nonetheless, they are very much part of the real Victorian world. Thus, in Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” the setting of ruins overgrown with ivy and bushes points back to the isolated castles of the 18th century Gothic; however, these particular ruins are not ancient – they are of the former mansion,

¹ Cavallaro, 48.
² Todorov, 33.
not of a medieval fort. Moreover, they are not isolated, being within a walking distance of the house, and the wild nature that the narrator deems “picturesque”\(^3\) is in fact part of a park which belongs to the house. Similarly, many other stories are set in old houses with the appropriate atmosphere of darkness, but which are nevertheless also part of a city and treated as any other property – and are thereby part of the Victorian reality. Also, most of the stories contain up-to-date technology and characters who are familiar with current developments in medicine and psychology, making it hard for the reader to pretend that the stories are not set in the real world of approximately their own time. This disqualifies the allegorical and poetic interpretation of the stories and fulfils Todorov’s third criterion.

With regard to the first criterion, I have argued throughout this work that the stories make use of newly developing theories of vision as well as the controversy surrounding the nature of apparitions to set up the moment of hesitation for the reader. The reader is presented with conflicting evidence and usually also with several different characters’ points of view, which are all shown to be unreliable, making it impossible for him to decide with certainty whether the events discussed in the story are natural or supernatural in origin. The hesitation is strengthened by the fact that the reader has multiple natural and multiple supernatural explanations to choose from, and authoritative claims to support each of them. If natural, the apparition can be an effect of unreliable sight which is influenced by surrounding conditions such as light, but also by the physical condition and psychological state of the observer. Alternatively, it could also be a product of the character’s imagination, relegating it to the realm of psychology. If supernatural, the apparition can be a product of the inner sight, celebrated by spiritualists, which would suggest the apparition to be a person in the next stage of existence. Another explanation is a religious one, which would ascribe the apparition to the work of either an evil or beneficial spirit. The characters in the stories hesitate as well, however by the end of

\(^3\) Olyphant, 2.
the story they usually settle for an imperfect explanation and simply convince themselves to believe it. In contrast to this, a reader who carefully considers all the evidence presented is still left in doubt by the ending of the story, fulfilling the first condition of the fantastic genre.

The endings of the stories comply with Todorov’s definition, in which the hesitation of the character is optional, but the hesitation of the reader is crucial. It also seems to be the best way for the successor of the gothic genre to subvert the notions of safety and clarity and to incur fear and hesitation in the reader. Viewed from this perspective, the ghost story addresses an important aspect of social life in the Victorian age while at the same time retaining its purpose as literature that is supposed to be sensational and rely on feelings of fear. Like gothic novels, which are usually resolved in favour of the protagonists, the ghost stories also restore the balance in the end by having the character adopt some stance on the apparition; nevertheless, their most unsettling quality is that, on deeper reflection, the stories are shown to not have been resolved as neatly as the protagonists suppose, leaving space for the reader to hesitate not only about the events in the story but also about his own capacity for self-deception and the impossibility of arriving at the definitive truth in many questions in life. Thus, I would view the hesitation of the reader and the inspection of the nature of knowledge as the innovative feature of ghost stories, in contrast to the original Gothic genre, which relied on pleasant and removed feelings of horror that were in the end not affecting the reader personally.

Coming back to the claim that the fantastic genre can be used to discuss taboos and themes that do not reach mainstream literature, it has to be admitted that themes connected with taboos such as sexual perversions and violence, often appearing in Gothic novels, are notably absent from ghost stories. However, the source of anxiety in ghost stories seems to be something different but equally ignored in the serious literature of the day – the fear that comes from the impossibility of knowing the truth. The main aim of ghost stories seems to be to destabilize all
notions of truth and meaning and then allow the protagonist to settle on an arbitrarily accepted solution, while at the same time the reader’s uncertainty remains.

I would argue that by discarding the more sensational Gothic tropes, bringing the stories into settings familiar to the reader and addressing questions and doubts about vision and knowledge that were very much present in the reader’s everyday life, Victorian ghost stories achieve through the medium of the apparition the effect of hesitation in the reader, and manage to be a relevant commentary on one problem that is largely ignored in the more serious novels and stories which purport to truthfully and accurately depict life – the reality that there is always a biased point of view and that every person is in fact unreliable with regard to his or her perceptions. Another thing that is neatly subverted in the ghost stories is the concept of meaning. The idea that every occurrence in the novel means something and is pertinent to the storyline is a pure fiction, as is revealed in the events of the ghost stories where the ghost’s purpose is often undecipherable and does not change the outcome of the story in the slightest. Also, unlike detective stories, in which every piece of description is evidence to be later used to discover the truth, the ghost stories gleefully present completely contradictory pieces of evidence that point to several solutions at once and are never fully explained, destroying the illusion of being able to arrive at the correct solution through observing long and well enough.

In this regard the idea presented by the ghost stories is a truly daunting one; however, it is mitigated by the fact that the characters always appear to resolve the question somehow, either incorporating the ghost into the framework of medicine, psychology, optics or natural effects, or accepting it as a supernatural visitor and ascribing it some meaning as such. In many cases the actual storyline is fairly trivial and not terribly frightening; regardless, at the end of a good ghost story, a niggling doubt remains for the reader perhaps not so much about the actual origin and meaning of the apparition but rather about the possibility of knowing the truth, about the
unsure status of vision as a means to knowledge and about the very real potential for self-deception.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

On concluding this work, it might be useful to put forward a few tentative suggestions as to ways of expanding on the presented line of research.

The present work is not concerned with the other successor of the Gothic novel, the vampire story. A concern with visual evidence is also present in these stories, however, since the supernatural creatures in these types of stories are tangible, the nature of the hesitation is slightly different. Nevertheless, vampire tales afford an interesting field of investigation for our claims, since in many of them the source of fear is the fact that the monster can look human and as such remain undetected among the population, which once again leads to the question of the reliability of sight. This anxiety is assuaged by perpetrating the fantasy that the vampire can be diagnosed on the basis of certain visual features; this might be related to actual attempts to connect visual traits with psychological ones, such as in phrenology, or even to trace signs of criminal character and disease in the physical appearance, such as in Lombroso’s theory of criminal degeneracy or in Barclays’s *A Manual of Medical Diagnosis* (1862), where he states that “the general appearance of the patient affords to the physician very distinct indications of the nature of the disease, and of the organ in which it is probably located.”

Although he warns that “their only use is in directing the practitioner where he is to look for disease, the nature of which must be afterwards determined by its own special phenomena,” this attitude still supports the notion that if the physician reads the visual clues correctly, they will lead him to the truth about the nature of the disease. Furthermore, the nature of the vampire and of the

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5 Barclay, 49.
characters’ approach to the situation lend themselves to interpretation in terms of other topics current in the Victorian age, which would be worth investigating.

The question of interpretation of visual clues is also part of detective fiction, which, as we have already mentioned, is predicated on the idea that it is possible to arrive at the truth by correctly interpreting meaningful signs – a stance that is completely opposite to that present in ghost stories. It would be interesting to consider the extent to which the methods of investigation in detective stories rely on sight and to investigate the extent to which the link between sight and knowledge is or is not questioned within the content of the stories, especially when a supernatural explanation also presents itself, as for example in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Hound of the Baskervilles” (1902). Furthermore, as Srdjan Smajic points out, the detective himself often possesses an almost supernatural capacity for deduction, and inexplicable intuitions, rather than facts, lead him to the correct conclusion. The different concepts of vision in ghost and detective stories have already been explored in Smajic’s *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists* (2010); however, it might be interesting to investigate the treatment of knowledge and the unknown in Victorian detective stories and draw further conclusions further conclusions on Victorian ideas in this regard.

Alternatively, the question of sight as means to knowledge could be pursued to more modern works that feature Gothic elements. The concepts of vision that emerged in the twentieth century and how they changed the nature of stories that contain supernatural elements might be compared to the arguments that we have put forward about the nature of Victorian ghost fiction.
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