Thursday 25 May 2006. **210ENG282**

Discuss the preoccupation with historical guilt in a least two works of nineteenth-century Irish Gothic fiction530.

> '"I am sure – I *know*," continued Barton, with increasing excitement, "that there is a God – a dreadful God – and that retribution follows guilt, in ways the most mysterious and stupendous – by agencies the most inexplicable and terrific; - there is a spiritual system – great God, how I have been convinced! – a system malignant, and implacable, and omnipotent, under whose persecutions I am, and have been, suffering the torments of the damned! – yes, sir – yes – the fires and frenzy of hell!'
> (*In A Glass Darkly*, 'The Familiar', p.60)

Guilt and retribution are essential themes of the Gothic literary genre; what is a ghost, after all, if not a manifestation of an ancient crime that has not yet been avenged? What is more terrifying than being hunted – or haunted - by a monster born from our own sins, like the creature resulting from Dr. Frankenstein's hubris, or like John Melmoth, cursed by his own blasphemous arrogance? In the Irish Gothic fiction, moreover, that individual guilt seems to find a resonance with the troubled history of the island. Interestingly, the most famous Irish writers of the Gothic genre, Maturin, Le Fanu and Stoker, were Irish Protestants, members of that 'Anglo-Irish' class which appeared in the nineteenth century[1]. They could trace their roots in the Protestant Ascendancy which had dominated the eighteenth century, but whose power had started to wane after the Act of Union. In more than one sense, they were hybrids: Irish Huguenots (Maturin and Le Fanu), or with a Dutch ancestry (Stoker). This particular 'Twilight of the Gods' could possibly be an ingredient of the physical – and moral – darkness in Le Fanu's short

[1] See Foster, ch.4, 'Ascendancy and Union'.

stories and *Uncle Silas*, where a repressed guilt manifests itself through an increasingly neurotic atmosphere. The aristocratic and proud Dracula who is the last member of an ancient race, obsessed with blood, fighting an invading modernity with its own weapons, may also be an echo of the brave old world. To understand, then, how historical guilt influences Irish Gothic fiction, two main angles can be considered: one psychoanalytical, focussing on individual guilt and familial history, the other postcolonial, analysing the symbolic Other[2], the sins of the collective consciousness, the threats to the national identity. *In a Glass Darkly* and *Uncle Silas* reveal interesting concepts under a psychoanalytical light, whereas *Dracula*, when analysed by postcolonial critics such as Arata[3], exhibits historical perspectives which go beyond a mere clash of Tradition and Modernism. The focus will be on *In A Glass Darkly*, *Uncle Silas* and *Dracula*, and as far as possible both critical frameworks will be applied to all these works.

Le Fanu, in the short stories gathered in *In a Glass Darkly*, sets the action in a relatively distant past, during times associated with major historical events in Ireland. All the tales are supposed to be excerpts from the notes of a Doctor Hesselius, now dead: *Green Day* is said to relate to a case which happened 'about sixty-four years ago'[4], probably then around 1760-1770, during the viceroyalty of Townsend, who was trying to fight back the 'undertaker' factions, powerful local grandees[5]; in *The Familiar*, it is 'somewhere about 1794'[6], near the uprising of 1796, when the United Irishmen were seen

[2] Using Said's concepts, see Introduction of *Orientalism.*
[3] Stephen D. Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation', ch.7 in *New Casebooks: Dracula*, p.119.
[4] *In A Glass Darkly*, p.6.
[5] *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, pp.168-169.
[6] ibid., p.42.

as a threat; *Justice Harbottle*'s Chapter II opens with 'One night during the session of 1746'[7], that is, after the defeat of Jacobitism; the portrait of Carmilla – or Mircalla, Countess Karnstein – is dated 'AD 1698'[8], just after the Williamite Wars. All are essential dates in the Anglo-Irish tradition; all point to its defining historical myths. Le Fanu, however, uses those dates in tales that are also strong condemnations of all three main orders of the Ascendancy, as Begnal points out[9]: Reverend Jennings in *Green Tea* loses his faith because of his intellectual pride, Sir James Barton, 'younger brother of a certain baronet'[10], is caught up by his past crime in *The Familiar*, and Justice Harbottle, in the eponymous story, is actually sentenced for his injustice and corruption. All three die, and although there is a supernatural aspect in their death, there is equally a natural explanation, where they are their own executioners.

Le Fanu's tales always involve an alter ego, who mirrors to a certain extent a character, but with monstrous deformations: an essential schizophrenia, which brings in conflict two opposite aspects of the same personality: Rev. Jenning and his monkey, Sir James Barton and 'the Watcher', Justice Harbottle and 'Chief-Justice Twofold'. Those demons, as Tracy underlines[11], are shaped by the very guilt and fears of their victims, and the supernatural murder is also an ordinary suicide. Le Fanu's Gothic is psychological; before Freud, it focuses on the Unconscious, source of our neuroses, and on the opposition between the animal Id and the civilised Super-Ego for control of the Self. Interestingly, the Lacanian 'mirror-phase' corresponds to the beginning of self-

[7] ibid., p.88.
[8] *In A Glass Darkly*, p.273.
[9] *Joseph Sheridan Lefanu*, Begnal, p.41.
[10] *In A Glass Darkly*, p.42.
[11] *In A Glass Darkly*, introduction by R. Tracy, p. X.

perception, but also to the realisation of ultimate disintegration, decline and death[12]. Projected beyond the individual, who becomes an archetype, this mirror effect becomes a reflection of a class. The cleric, the aristocrat and the chief justice are faced with their inner monsters, and the civilisation they represent is debased by its animal vices.

Such themes are also present in Le Fanu's major novel, *Uncle Silas*. Its location, although English, was initially Irish: as McCormack indicates, it is because of his publisher, who considered Irish stories unpopular, that Le Fanu transposed the plot to Yorkshire[13]. Bowen could recognise in the 'Big House' theme, and its two main incarnations, Knowl and Bartram-Haugh the novel's Irishness[14]. The Ruthyns are members of the landed gentry, and the story unfolds in the 1830s (Silas's portrait as a child in Chapter XII is dated 15 May, 1779[15], and he is in his sixties), as the Anglo-Irish ruling class is starting to replace the declining Protestant Ascendancy[16], and as Daniel O'Connell and the Catholic Emancipation Act are giving more power to the Catholic Irish[17]. Maud Ruthyn describes her own family as 'of a very ancient lineage', 'of a proud and ancient spirit', 'thinking themselves higher in station and purer of blood' than most of the nobility of which they could have been members[18]. Austin Silas and his alter ego Silas represent two extremes of the landlord: Austin is generous, selfless, formerly involved in local government but not pretentious enough to go for a higher position,

[12] See *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p.255.
[13] *In A Glass Darkly*, introduction by R. Tracy, p.
[14] See Bowen's introduction to *Uncle Silas*.
[15] *Uncle Silas*, p.88.
[16] See Marjorie Howe, 'Misalliance and Anglo-Irish Tradition in Le Fanu's Uncle Silas', pp.164-166.
[17] *History of Ireland*, pp.186-189.
[18] *Uncle Silas*, Chapter I, p.31.

loved and respected by his neighbours and his people[19]; Silas is greedy, selfish, corrupt, despised by almost everyone, and manages Bartram-Haugh abusively. Marjorie Howe perceives them both, however, as absentees, isolated – and declining - power, be it positive or negative[20]. Both brothers are ready to go to great lengths to ensure the preservation of the Ruthyn name: Austin by sacrificing his own daughter by putting her in the care of her uncle who he does not trust, and Silas by marrying her to his son Dudley, who he despises. It is unclear whether Austin also had that marriage in mind. Dudley's main quality to Silas is 'that he has the Ruthyn blood – the purest blood, I maintain it, in England'[21], which is ironic on several levels, considering that he is an uncivilised boor whose mother was a Welsh barmaid – a noticeable Celtic ingredient, as indicated by Howe[22]. The plan backfires spectacularly, though, with respectively the death, suicide and banishment of the three Ruthyn males, Austin, Silas, and Dudley.

Le Fanu turns this obsession with blood, lineage and miscegenation into an increasingly neurotic atmosphere. The Swedenborgian theme of the spirit world can be translated into the language of psychoanalysis, where Heaven and Hell are two poles between which the Self balances, and where evil spirits are lurking in the darkness of the Unconscious. Schelling defines the uncanny as 'anything which ought to remain in secrecy and has become manifest'[23], and in *Uncle Silas* it is the slow revelation of the Ruthyns' secrets and guilt which adds to the invading gloom. Sickness and decay are

[19] See Maud's panegyric of her father in *Uncle Silas*, p.167.
[20] Howe, pp.176-177.
[21] *Uncle Silas*, p.360.
[22] Howe, p.175 and p.185.
[23] As quoted by P. Coughlan in 'Doubles, Shadows, Sedan-chairs and the Past: the "Ghost Stories" of Le Fanu', in *Critical Approaches to Anglo-Irish Literature*, p.22.

omnipresent: Austin dies of illness, and Silas' mental state is apparent in his fits. The blood so precious to Austin and Silas is mirrored by the 'perfect pond of blood' of the murdered Charke[24], and the 'one great patch of blood' on Captain Oakley's face and shirt[25]. Crime is the result of the obsession with power and purity, and it is punished by sickness, be it physical or mental, and decay, both linked to guilt. As in the tales in *In A Glass Darkly*, there are two possible readings: one supernatural, the other human, and again the individual becomes a representation of a class.

Obsession with blood is also the characteristic of the vampire, as in Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' or Stoker's *Dracula*. Both Carmilla and Dracula are aristocratic figures of a very ancient lineage, whose roots dig deeply into their native land: Carmilla only says that 'her family was very ancient and noble'[26], and she is revealed as the Countess Karnstein, from an extinct family, ruined in 'some civil wars'[27]; Dracula declares 'We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship'[28]. Both then are creatures of the soil, a soil where they need to rest but in which, paradoxically, they cannot stay buried. They are from the past, Un-dead, extending their existence beyond its natural duration by crime: possession, rape, murder, and the ultimate corruption of assimilation to their debased kin. Both are opposed to foreign invaders, hybrid and cosmopolitan: in 'Carmilla', Laura is half-English, and her household mixes different nationalities; in *Dracula*, the vampire fights a multinational team (Van Helsing is Dutch, Morris American), who invades his

[24] *Uncle Silas*, p.188.
[25] ibid., p.344.
[26] *In a Glass Darkly*, p.263.
[27] ibid, p. 273.
[28] *Dracula*, p.42.

land to destroy him. Punter sums it up: the vampire 'requires blood because blood is the business of an aristocracy, the blood of warfare and the blood of the family'[29]. This Un-dead is as anachronistic as it is sinful, a demon born out of historical guilt.

A postcolonial reading can see in Dracula the ghost of the Empire, and it is possible to argue, as Arata does[30], that British Orientalism is mirrored by the vampire's 'Occidentalism', the invasion he carries to the very centre of the Metropolis: Piccadilly[31]! The Orient, initially narrated and defined by Jonathan Harker, whose soil has seen the blood of many an invader[32], escapes the imperial discourse and takes a life of its own: unnatural, because incomprehensible. It goes beyond reality as defined by the Westerner, the British, for whom landscapes are 'picturesque' and easily tamed in travel books, as, for instance, Ireland was perceived in the nineteenth century. As Chris Morash points out, Victorian Ireland was the Orient, the exotic Other, whose civilisation was inferior but full of sensual mysteries and fascinating archaisms[33]. The counter-invasion of Dracula can then be understood as the enactment of the threat of the Other: that it might assimilate Us, thereby turning us into him and destroying our identity. Like the Count emerging from his lair[34], the world would be turned upside down. As in Le Fanu's tales, the Other is revealed as a double: the monster is a reflection of the Self. Dracula mirrors Jonathan Harker: he steals his clothes, his youth, his sexual vigour and, fatally, his wife. He goes native in London like Richard Burton in Mecca (as noted by Arata). He uses the

[29] Punter, *The Literature of Terror, Vol 1., The Gothic Tradition*, p.104.
[30] Stephen D.Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation', in *New Casebooks: Dracula*, ch.7, pp.119-144.
[31] *Dracula*, pp.222-223.
[32] Ibid. pp.42-43.
[33] Chris Morash, '"Even under some unnatural condition": Bram Stoker and the Colonial Fantastic', in *Literature and the Supernatural*.
[34] *Dracula*, p.49.

infrastructure of the Empire against itself: solicitors, trains, or boats. As Seed underlines, his enemies are archetypes of the Victorian establishment: Seward the doctor and Harker the solicitor[35]. His plan is to destroy the Empire from within, by taking possession of its people, and his methods, conquest by force, violence and murder, are after all the same as the Empire has used to expand itself in its own time. Dracula, then, is Imperial guilt coming back to haunt the Metropolis.

Dracula, as well as Carmilla, are monsters, but highly seductive ones. They attract as much as they disgust. Dracula, with his superhuman strength, his imperious will, his extraordinary virility, is an archetypal Uebermensch, whose domination we fear but secretly crave. Carmilla seduces through her nobility, her attraction is linked to nostalgia. Wrapped in their prestigious past, they also terrify by their complete absence of guilt: they are completely selfish, self-centered, isolated and pure. They are so selfish that they do not even have a reflection! Nina Auerback notes that vampires are destroyed when they are known[36], seen for what they are, a procedure that reminds us of psychoanalysis. Indeed, in *Dracula,* hypnosis becomes a weapon: through Mina, the allies are able to *see* where the monster is, to track him, and ultimately, to destroy him. The ambivalence of attraction and repulsion corresponds to the opposition of desire and guilt, and is the base of identity: a balance between selfishness, self-consciousness and the perception of the Other. In *Dracula,* the selfish, sinful Other is defeated by hybrids, whose bloods are mixed and whose genders have blurred. He is

[35] David Seed, 'The Narrative Method of Dracula', p.72.
[36] Nina Auerback, 'A vampire of our own', in *New Casebooks: Dracula*, p.147.

banished back into the realm of the Unconscious, the domain of the dream. The guilt, brought out for a time into the open, has been symbolically exorcised.

Like *Uncle Silas*, *Dracula* is about the desperate – and doomed – fight of a class to retain its purity, its identity. Howe explains that the Protestant Ascendancy created an Anglo-Irish tradition that was at the same time legitimating and empowering but also broken, betrayed, corrupt, in other words guilty, because of its essential status as hybrid and its threatened political position[37]. A similar fundamental ambiguity is found throughout Gothic Irish fiction, where the past is seen as prestigious, noble, but also as criminal, corrupt. Silas is deeply flawed, but as the last male representative of a noble class he also possesses a certain aura. Maud herself is never sure whether to love or fear him, whether he is guilty or mislaid. Dracula is also the last one of his race, and so is Carmilla, and there is a certain understanding of their animal need to survive, despite all their faults. Punter defines the Gothic as 'the representative of a particular antagonistic attitude towards realism'[38], and there is an undeniably Romantic appeal to all these monsters. Creations of a mythological past, their nature itself dooms them: they are not monsters by choice, but by essence. They cannot help being what they are, in the same way that the Anglo-Irish class was not responsible for its past, although it inherited the guilt.

It could be possible to argue then, that historical guilt is at the heart of Irish Gothic fiction, that the construction of an Anglo-Irish tradition defined by its ambiguities,

[37] Howe, p.165.
[38] Punter, p. 17.

in terms of power, race and history, is the real subject of works like *In A Glass Darkly*, *Uncle Silas* or *Dracula*. In the Irish context, Tracy thinks that political issues can be transposed in supernatural terms, when religion and politics are mixed[39]. Ownership of the land and legitimacy of power are the main problems, and the Gothic genre allows the ambiguities to be presented without being explained: it is based on reflections, but in deforming mirrors. This lack of realism is an advantage here, because the Anglo-Irish tradition is highly Romantic in character: irrational, troubled, and turned toward the past, it feels under threat from enemies it cannot identify. It has mixed feelings about history, because it is aware of the fundamental injustices of the very events it uses to build its own mythology. It is obsessed as much by the blood running in its veins as the one spilled on its hands. Afraid of its decline, it defines itself by opposition to the Other, a 'fortress mentality' which protects but isolates it. All of those characteristics fit remarkably well in the Gothic literary genre, where they can be exposed without being revealed.

[39] Tracy, in his introduction to *In A Glass Darkly*, p. xix.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Primary Sources:

Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan (1947) *Uncle Silas, A Tale Of Bartram-Haugh*, The Cresset Press, London.
(Borrowed from Belfast Central Library, Irish and Local Studies department. Introduction by Elizabeth Bowen)

Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan (1999) *In A Glass Darkly*, Oxford World's Classic, Oxford University Press.
(Borrowed from QUB Library, ref. PR4879.L7 INAG, focus on 'Carmilla')

Maturin, Charles Robert (1977) *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Penguin Books, London.
(Borrowed from the Linen Hall Library, ref.I.83.1 MATU. Only the opening chapters)

Stoker, Bram (1993) *Dracula*, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, London.
(Personal copy)

Secondary Sources:

Allen, Michael & Wilcox, Angela ed. (1989) *Critical Approaches to Anglo-Irish Literature*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross.
(Borrowed from the Linen Hall Library, ref. I.85 ALLE. Used article by Patricia Coughlan, 'Doubles, Shadows, Sedan-Chairs and the Past: the "Ghost Stories" of J.S. Le Fanu)

Begnal, M. H. (1971) *Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu*, Lewisburg Bucknell University Press, Associated University Press, New Jersey.
(Borrowed from QUB Library, ref. PR4879.L7 ZZBE. A short critical analysis of Le Fanu's works)

Byron, G. ed. (1999) *Dracula*, New Casebooks, Macmillan Press, London.
(Borrowed from QUB Library, ref.PR6037.T6 ZZBY. Esp. Article by Stephen D.Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation', ch.7 p.119)

Cosgrove, B. ed. (1995) *Literature and the Supernatural*, Maynooth Bicentenary Series, The Columba Press, Dublin.
(Borrowed from the Linen Hall Library, ref. I.85 COSG: article by Chris Morash, '"Even under Some Unnatural Condition": Bram Stoker and the Colonial Fantastic', p.95)

Foster, R.F. ed (2000) *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
(Personal copy. Used chapters 4, 'Ascendancy and Union', and 5, 'Ireland since 1870', for historical background information)

Howes, M. (1992) 'Misalliance and Anglo-Irish Tradition in Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 47 No. 2, pp. 164-186, University of California Press.
(Found on JSTOR)

Macey, D. (2001) *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Penguin Books, London.
(Personal collection, used to check some of the critical terms)

McCormack, W. J. (1993) *Dissolute Characters, Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
(Borrowed from the Linen Hall Library, ref. I.85 MACC, esp. ch.11, 'In a Glass Darkly', and ch.13, 'Gladstone and Ascendancy: or, Here we go round the upas tree')

Punter, D. (1996) *The Literature of Terror, Vol.1, The Gothic Tradition, 2nd ed.*, Longman Group, London.
(Borrowed from QUB Library, ref. PR830.T3 PUNT. Used ch.1 'Introductory: Dimensions of Gothic, and ch.8, 'Gothic and the Sensation Novel')

Said, E.W. (2003) *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London.
(Personal copy. Used the introduction and the concepts described there)

Seed, D. (1985) 'The Narrative Method of Dracula', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 61-75, University of California Press.
(Found on JSTOR)