SHERIDAN LE FANU: MASTER OF THE OCCULT, THE UNCANNY AND THE OMINOUS

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As is suggested by its title[1], the aim of the present study is to analyse and comment on the supernatural elements to be found in the work of an author who, in the opinion of many authorised critics, is undoubtedly the best ghost story writer the British Isles have ever produced - the Anglo-Irish novelist and short-story writer, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. For although he does not today enjoy the popularity which he obviously deserves[2], and this may well be due to the fact that the ghost story in which he excelled, is no longer, as a literary genre, very highly considered, his work has long been appreciated by a select group of critics, and, above all, of novelists, and, in particular, of novelists specialising in areas of literary imagination akin to his. These include, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle who, in fact, appropriated the basic plot of Le Fanu's most distinguished novel of suspense and mystery, *Uncle Silas*, for his own novel, *The Firm of Girdlestone*, 1890, and Bram Stoker who undoubtedly wrote his *Dracula* "as a kind of sequel to Le Fanu's powerful and innovational vampire story, *Carmilla*"[3] . Stoker likewise borrowed an episode involving a large and repulsive rat which appears in his *The Judge's House* from a similar episode in the Irishman's *Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street*. The distinguished and scholarly Dorothy Sayers, one of England's most outstanding writers of detective fiction, and one of the earliest theoreticians of the genre, was maintaining in 1928[4] that the detective story would never survive unless it got back to where it began in the hands of Wilkie Collins and Le Fanu, whose works were novels of manners, not mere crossword puzzles, and, in fact, when writing her semi-autobiographical detective novel, *Gaudy Night*, had her scholarly heroine engaged in research precisely on Le Fanu, just as she herself, Dorothy Sayers, had done research on Collins.

1.-A title appropriated from Samuel C, Chew's evaluation of Le Fanu in *A Literary History of England* Edited by A.C.Baugh, London, 1948,p. 1353, n.9.
2.-Although *Uncle Silas* has been recently returned into "a major BBC TV serial" and, possibly on that account, republished by Oxford University Press in their World's Classics series in February 1989.
3.-*Uncle Silas, a Tale of Bartram-Haugh, by J.S.Le Fanu, with a New Introduction by Frederick Shroyer*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1966,p. xi.
4.-In her introduction to the second volume of *The Omnibus of Crime*, New York. 1932.

Henry James, himself a pastmaster in the creation of fictional suspense, has likewise paid his respects to Le Fanu's work, and there are undoubtedly reminiscenses of *Uncle Silas* in *The Turn of the Screw*. In his story, *The Liar,* James was to write: "There was the customary novel of Mr. Le Fanu for the bedtable; the ideal reading in a country house for the hours after midnight", an opinion with which one of Le Fanu's latest editors prefers to disagree: "*Uncle Silas* is definitely not a novel to be read alone, in a creaking, deserted house, late at night"[5] . M.R. James, usually considered the modern master of the ghost story, who has edited, and written an introduction to, a number of Le Fanu's works[6], refers to him as the "Master" (with a capital M), insiting that "he stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories". Elizabeth Bowen, in her introduction to the 1946 edition of *Uncle Silas,* considers the novel to be the first of the psychological thrillers, and the eminent critic and short-story writer, V.S.Pritchett, hails Le Fanu as "the Simenon of the peculiar", adding that, "He is expert in screwing up tension little by little without strain, and an artist in surprise"[7] . Nor have contemporary theoreticians of the novel of suspense been stinting in their praises, thus Jacques Barzun and Wendell H.Taylor observe: "Le Fanu had a rich fantasy and a genius for making it seem plausible. One needs to adjust to this deliberate pace, but once that is done, what a wizard!"[8] , whilst Julian Symons dedicates four pages[9] of his book *Bloody Murder* to the achievement of Le Fanu in the field of the crime novel, and laments that his talent should continue to go unacknowledged. He was, he says, "a writer of remarkable power in creating suspense, at his best a master of plot, and the creator of some of the most satisfying villains in Victorian literature"[10] . In one of the most recent reference works in the field, *Survey of Fantasy Literature,* 1983, the entry on Le Fanu by G.W. Crawford closes:

> "Le Fanu's body of short fiction is almost entirely supernatural, and he remains the most significant figure in the ghost form in the Victoran era. His work in the genre has served as a source of inspiration for later writers, especially M.R.James, and his work will no doubt become more profoundly significant as it is studied in depth by future critics"[11]

5.-Frederick Shroewr, op. cit.. p. v.
6.-M.R.James: Introduction to his edition of *Madame Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery*, London, 1923.
7.-V.S.Prichett: *The Living Novel*, Arrow Books, London, 1960, p. 104.
8.-Jacques Barzun and Wendell H. Taylor: *A Catalogue of Crime*, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p. 583.
9.-Julian Symons: *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: a History*, Faber and Faber, London, 1927, pp. 59-61.
10.-Ibid. p. 59.
11-.Ed. Frank N. Magill: *Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature*, Salem Press. Englewood Cliffs, N.Jersey, 1983, vol. IV, p. 1606.

Before, however, analising some of the most characteristic of the supernatural elements in Le Fanu's short stories, it would not, perhaps, be inappropiate to offer a brief biographical sketch of this relatively little known author, who was born in Dublin in 1814. His father was a Church of Ireland clergyman of Huguenot descent, hence the French surname, whilst he was related, on his mother's side, to the great 18th century Irish dramatist, Richard Brinslay Sheridan, hence the Christian name.

Although he studied law at Trinity College, Dublin, he soon gave this up in order to dedicate himself to journalism, becoming the editor of several Dublin newspapers and periodicals, including the highly influential and successful *Dublin University Magazine* which, under his editorship (1856-69), was to become one of the leading European journals of the time. He had started writing short stories at an early age, and, significantly, the first story that he had published, when he was only twenty-two, was entitled *The Ghost and the Bone Setter;* following this initial effort, Le Fanu was to write in all some thirty supernatural or ghost stories. His first full-length novel, *The Cock and the Anchor,* was published in 1845, a year after his marriage, and this and his second novel were self-confessed imitations of Sir Walter Scott whom he greatly admired and whose name he was later to invoke when he published *Uncle Silas* in 1864: fearing that his work would be described, or rather, implicitly censured, as a "sensation novel ", he hastens to point out in his short preface, that in the *Waverley* novels, "there is not a single tale in which death, crime, and in some form, mystery, have not a place", and yet, he says, "No one...would describe Sir Walter Scott's romances as sensation novels" .[12]

By the 1860s Le Fanu was producing what may be considered as his finest novels: *The House by the Churchyard* (1861-62), considered by M.R. James as his best novel, *Wylder's Hand* (1863-4), "a brilliant mystery puzzle" which Julian Symons sees as his "chief contribution in the field of detection"[13] and *Uncle Silas* , by general consensus his finest novel and for one critic, at least, "one of scant half dozen nineteenth century novels that are still read for pleasure rather than as a school exercise"[14]. At the same time he was publishing short stories, mostly concerning the supernatural, either in *The Dublin University Magazine* or in Dicken's *All the Year Round* or in Mrs. Braddons' *Belgravia.* Le Fanu's wife had died in 1858, leaving him a harassed father with a young family to bring up, and from that time onwards he seems to have begun to live more and more as a recluse, a circumstance which no doubt contributed to the characteristically melancholy tinge which

12.-Shrower's edition, from Le Fanu's *Preliminary Word*,p. xvii.
13.-Symons: op. cit., p. 60.
14.-E.F.Bleiler, in his Introduction to his edition of *Best Ghost Stories of J.S.Le Fanu*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1964, p. vi.

informs his later work. Indeed, in his final years he became the victim of terrifying night-mares, such as his heroes and heroines are often tormented by, in one of which, often repeated, he found himself transfixed before a decaying mansion which is about to collapse upon him (shades here of Edgar Allan Poe, of course!). When he was found dead, of a heart attack, in 1873, shortly after having published his last short story, significangtly entitled *Willing to Die,* his doctor remarked laconically and metaphorically, "At last, the house has fallen".

When dealing with an author whose literary talents and imaginative genius were so obviously at home in the depiction of "supernatural solicitings", one naturally tends to ask onesef to what extent he himself believed in the possible existence of such interventions from another world. Of course, as Julia Briggs points out: "To a certain extent all authors who write of the supernatural are expressing their feelings of curiosity about it, however publicly they may declare their scepticism and lack of interest in psychic research"[15]. In fact, in the case of Le Fanu, there is literary evidence to prove that he was indeed, very curious about any kind of supernatural manifestation, and not at all sceptical about psychic research - indeed, quite the opposite! His curiosity is demonstrated not only by his exploration of supernatural themes in his short stories, but also by the fact that as editor of the *Dublin University Magazine,* he published what is described as An Authenitc Narrative of a Haunted House, in an interesting preface to which he vouches for the unexceptionable respectability and reliability of those who had contributed to the "narrative", and insists that he is not perpetrating the kind of literary hoax that Defoe did when he published his *True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal.* On the contrary, as he points out: "As a mere story the narrative is valueless: its sole claim to attention is its absolute truth"[16] . He does, therefore, sound as if he himself were convinced of the authenticity of the events described in the "narrrative"!

The "narrative" reproduced is told in the first person, being composed, says Le Fanu by the head of the family whose members experienced the hauntings in question: as so often occurs in Le Fanu's fiction, the sinister and the evil obtrude into an apparently cosy domestic interior, that of an attractive, modern seaside house. All the members of the family and their servants, during their three months stay hear and see strange phemomena: there are rappings in the eaves, twisting of door-knobs, as shadow crossing and recrossing a white wall "in manifest defiance of the laws of Optics"[17] , and three solid, well-defined figures - a man, a one-eyed

15.-Julia Briggs: *Night Visitors The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, Faber, London, 1977, p. 138.
16.-Bleiler:*Best Ghost Stories of J.S.Le Fanu*, p. 419.
17.-Ibid., p. 423.

old woman and a young girl with a gash in her throat - appear now to one now to another of the inmates of the house; none of these apparitions pay the slightest attention to the living inhabitants of the house, each being apparently engaged in the perpetual reenactment of the roles they played in some past crime. The narrator is at great pains to explain that they all sought a natural explanation for these phenomena, and underlines the fact that even the servants (the lower orders generally being considered more superstitious than their masters) at first believed the house to be haunted by smugglers rather than bona fide phantoms. Authentic though the relation may be, it does have a slightly dramatic denouement, since the narrator eventually learns that the house was not, in fact a modern one, but had been "altered and fitted up recently"[18] . Fifty years before, it had formed part of an old government store on a lonely site at that time, a spot, comments his elderly informant, "more fitted for the commision of a secret crime could not have been imagined"[19] . The earnestness with which Le Fanu defends the authenticity of this story would seem to suggest, therefore, that, on the one hand, he was personally convinced by it, and on the other, perhaps more slyly, that as a professional writer of ghost stories, the appearance of such an unbiased description of inexplicable phenomena would help to lend credence to his own supernatural inventions.

That Le Fanu, far from being sceptical of psychic research was, in fact, a champion thereof, is manifest in the fact that what are undoubtedly his most impressive ghost stories form part of a collection called *In a Glass Darkly,* which purport to be memoranda and letters from the case-books of a German physician, or rather psychiatrist avant la lettre, called Dr. Martin Hesselius, as preserved by the narrator, an ex-medical man himself, who acted as Hesselius' medical secretary for twenty years. The case-book technique, of course, was later to be adopted by Conan Doyle for his Sherlock Holmes series, in which Dr. Watson (another ex-medical man) plays the role of I-narrator[20] . Dr. Hesselius is described as a man of immense knowledge and an intuitive grasp of psychic phenomena who, says the admiring narrator, when faced with a case, "...with all the force and originality of genius, proceeds to the work of analysis, diagonosis and illustration". Le Fanu is responsible, therefore, for conferring literary respectability on the psychiatrist's profession, and the intriguing Dr. Hesselius was to be first of a whole line of fictional psychic doctors,

18.-Ibid., p. 430.
19.-Ibid., p. 430.
20.-Charles Higham, the biographer of Conan Doyle, in *The Adventures of Conan Doyle*, Haimish Hamilton, London, 1976, p. 126, finds another parallelism between the work of the two men: Helen Penclosa, the temptress (in Doyle's *The Parasite*) is as much a symbol of primitive sexuality as is the little monkey which haunts the clergyman in Sheridan Le Fanu's masterpiece, *Green Tea".*

including Algernon Blackwood's John Silence and William H.Hodgson's Carnacki. For it is interesting to note, as the century advanced, the growing importance of the physician as confidant and exorcist, a role traditionally performed by the priest or the clergyman. The Church seems to have felt as increasingly inadequate when faced by the powers of evil, above all those emanating from the sufferer's own psyche, and it is significant that in Le Fanu's most anthologised story, *Green Tea,* the victim of a hallucinatory persecution is , in fact, a clergyman himself, who turns to Dr. Hesselius for help. As Julia Briggs points out: "In creating psychic doctors capable of releasing the ego from the terrifying grip of the incomprehensible, insubordinate id, the late nineteenth century ghost story anticipated the advent of Freud."[21] .

Le Fanu's interest and possible belief in the interference in this world by elements from another might likewise have been stimulated by his familiarity with the rather gloomy doctrines of the Swedish philosopher, Emanuel Swedenborg, with their belief in the activities of evil spirits or genii endangering the relationship between God and man, a familiarity which he revealed in *Uncle Silas* where he presents Maud Ruthyn's father as a confirmed Swedenborgian, and again, in *Green Tea* where he even quotes, translated into English, a number of passages from Swedengborg's *Arcana Calestia*, concerning evil spirits: for example, "There are with every man at least two evil spirits...", etc.[22].

Finally, it should be remembered that Le Fanu, and, indeed, Scott, were imbued with the stories passed on by oral transmission and the local traditions and beliefs of remote areas of their respective countries, Ireland and Scotland, and both, in fact, drew on local legendary of their native districts for elements and characteristic patterns of folklore by means of which to endow their stories with even greater convictions. As a child, Le Fanu had spent long periods in rural areas of Ireland such as Limerick, and, presumably, was familiar from childhood with such manifestations of otherworld activity as that of the *White Cat of Drumgunniol* [23] , whose apparition before a member of the Donovan family always portended a speedy death. Indeed, "the notion of a sinister animal embodying a vengeful spirit is a very ancient one"[24], and, in fact, Le Fanu, was to have recourse more than once to this particular mode of supernatural manifestation. For all these reasons, therefore, it seems probable that Le Fanu himself was far from

21.-Op. cit. p. 22.
22.-Bleiler: *Best Ghost Stories of J.S Le Fanu*, p. 186.
23.-According to Bleiler, this tale is the best of the stories for which Le Fanu "used true Irish folklore", (Introduction. p. x).
24.-Julia Biggs: op., cit. p. 46.

being sceptical of the sort of otherwold intervention that constitutes the staple theme of his short stories.

Let us take a look, then, at this theme as it is illustrated in what are undoubtedly his most characteristic and most impressive works, a group of fifteen stories in which the occult, the uncanny and ominous occupy the center of the plot, and whose significance, within the respective stories, not infrequently constitutes an authentic challenge to the reader. The stories to be commented on here were all published between 1837 and 1871, and are of varying length, some, such as *Carmilla or The Haunted Baronet* might be classified as novellas , others are shorter; it is, in any case, of the essence of ghost stories that they should not be exaggeratedly long, for as Sir Walter Scott affirmed:"The supernatural...is...of a character which it is extremely difficult to sustain and of which a very small proportion may be said to be better than the whole "[25] . The majority of Le Fanu's stories are presented within some kind of framing device, a technique as old as Chaucer, and employed since by all the great masters of the genre including Henry James and Guy de Maupassant, for it is a technique which allows a story to be told legitimately in the first person, a first person narrative being particularly effective, in view of the immediacy it evokes, when applied to stories involving the evocation of mystery, suspense and terror. In several of the stories to be analysed, the supernatural events are described by the victims or witnesses themselves, and in others, by a friend of the victim's, as told to an acquaintance or group of acquaintances, or in the form of a written memorandum later to be discovered and transcribed by the narrator. The advantages of the first person narrator, and, consequently, of a unilateral point of view concerning the events taking place in a given story, were exploited to marvellous effect by Le Fanu in his long novel, *Uncle Silas*, and in his novella, *Carmilla,* since, in both cases, it allowed him to present an ingenuous heroine, unaware for the greater part of the story of the dangers surrounding her, which, however, become more and more obvious to the reader (that is how the suspense is built up), a heroine who is incapable, therefore, of taking the right steps to free herself therefrom, and, who, on occasions, literally throws herself into the traps set for her. Some of these stories belong to the Dr. Hesselius case-book collection, *In a Glass Darkly*, others belong to a collection of stories set in Ireland and supposedly extracted from *The Papers of the Late Father Purcell*, whilst a third group have, as their common setting, the fictional English town of Golden Friars and were published as The Chronicles of Friars: in this group, therefore, the same characters, or their descendants, such as the landlord of the George and Dragon inn, or the local doctor, recur in different stories. Of the stories to be

25.-Quoted by Julia Brggs op. cit.,p. 13.

mentioned, only *Sir Toby's Will* is unframed and told by an omniscient narrator, whilst the *Ghost Stories of the Tiled House* were originally inserted into Le Fanu's novel, *The House by the Churchyard* just as Scott had inserted his masterpiece of the supernatural, *Wandering Willie's Tale,* into *Redgauntlet.*

Julia Briggs remarks that it is of the nature of ghost stories "that they make no attempt to explain away their terrors in plausible terms"[26] as mystery or detective stories do; this is undoubtedly true, but what makes the supernatural episodes in Le Fanu's fiction so original and so impressive is that, plausible or not, they are never purely gratuitous or fortuitous, as regularly occured in the early nineteenth century Gothic novel, but are, with few exceptions, fully justified: "the fright", as V.S.Pritchett remarks, "is that effect follows cause"[27], there is a motive for the supernatural activity, generally that of revenge or retribution of "eye for an eye" type, visited on the guilty party, or his descendants, for a crime or an act of injustice committed in the past; the evil of these otherworld visitants in not "sportive, wilful, involuntary or extravagant"[28], since they are motivated just as the apparitions which present themselves to Richard III or to Macbeth are. And precisely because, we are to understand, such guilt does exist, in some of Le Fanu's finest stories *(Sir Toby's Will* or *Mr Justice Habottle),* the reader is left in doubt as to whether the apparitions are not purely the fruit of the victim's unconscious, released, perhaps, by specific physical circumstances of fatigue, strain, infirmity or an excessive addiction to stimulants or drugs; that is, one asks oneself whether the characters in question are haunting themselves rather than being haunted! In this sense Le Fanu might be viewed primarily as a psychologist, like his fictional creation, Dr. Hesselius, whose memoranda offer us the most outstanding of these guilt-ridden stories.

That Le Fanu saw his supernatural elements and episodes as something different to those which tended to appear in the typical Gothic novel is made obvious, surely, in a passage which he incorporated into *Uncle Silas*, a passage in which with a certain humour and irony he appears to dismiss the purely conventional kind of apparitions associated with rambling, gloomy, country mansions: the heroine writes of her home:

> There is not an old house in England of which the servants and young people who live in it do not cherish some traditions of the ghostly.
> Knowl has its shadows, noises and marvellous records. Rachel Ruthyn, the beauty of Queen Anne's time, who died of grief for the handsome Colonel Norbrooke, who was killed in the Low Countries, walks the house by night, in

26.-Ibid., p. 11.
27.-V.S.Pritchett: op. cit., p. 103.
28.-Ibid., p. 103.

crisp and sounding silks. She is not seen, only heard. The tapping of her high-heeled shoes, the sweep and rustle of her brocades...and sometimes, on stormy nights, her sobs.
There is beside the "linkman"; a lank, dark-faced, black-haired man, in a sable suit, with a link or torch in his hand"[29] .

The point is, of course, that beside the very real terror to be later felt by this narrator, these spectres are nothing but, as V.S.Pritchett might say, "...irresponsible and perambulatory figments of family history, mooning and clanking about in fancy dress"[30] . The passage is, surely, significant: we notice the insistence on the fact that old houses tend to evoke such ghostly traditions in the minds of servants and young people, that is to say, of the ignorant and the credulous - it is not something that would occur to a mature, educated adult, we are to understand! Again, no justification for the presence of the linkman is offered, and a broken heart is at best a poor excuse for Lady Rachel's perambulations. More importantly, we notice the traditional association of night time and spectral manifestations; in fact, as has already been observed, one of the most recent and interesting books of criticism on the genre is entitled *Night Visitors* [31] , thus underlining the traditional nature of this association.

Le Fanu's ghosts and apparitions, however, know no such limitations: what is, precisely, so terrifying about the malevolent persecutors of Mr. Jennings in *Green Tea* , or of Captain Barton in *The Familiar*, is that they may manifest themselves anywhere and at any time, during a sermon in a church, or on the crowded quayside of a Continental port, for, as V.S.Pritchett aptly observes, "Le Fanu is an artist in the domestic insinuation of the supernatural"[32] . We are hardly surprised to hear a clanking of chains, or to see a bleeding nun flitting through the gloomy corridors when crumbling Gothic castles or a ruined abbey are evoked, but it is when the supernatural obtrudes into prosaic, everyday life that it really becomes terrifying: in the *Authentic Relation...*, the ghosts present themselves when everything in the (as it turns out) haunted house was "comfortable and cheery"; nothing could be more cosy than the bar-parlour of the "George and Dragon" in *The Dead Sexton*, yet mine host is suddenly going to find himself offering hospitality to the Devil himself; Captain Barton first comes face to

29.-Shrower's edition, p. 20.
30.-V.S.Pritchett: op. cit., p. 103.
31.-Julia Briggs' *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story,* already referred to.
32.-V.S.Pritechett: op. cit., p. 104. David Cecil, in *Early Victorian Novelists*, Pelican Books, London, 1948, p. 38, likewise observes that it "..is the art of the ghost-story writer...by the use of the common, prosaic details of every day, to convince us of the concrete reality of some horror outside common experience".

face with his tormentor in a small street in Dublin whilst accompanied by two friends; Justice Harbottle sees the form of a man he has had well and truly hanged a week before, among the crowds thronging his daily place of work, the Old Bailey; Mr Jennings , in *Green Tea*, first meets his familiar in the evening, it is true, but in an omnibus of all places! Nothing could be more beautiful nor more peaceful than the moonlit scene in *Carmilla* whose tranquillity is so soon to be shattered by the eruption of a runaway coach bearing no ordinary passenger. Le Fanu is thus, in this respect, very much in line with, or probably responsible for, the creation of later critical doctrine on the subject. Thus, for Henry James, "the strange and sinister" must be "embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy"[33], and M.R.James affirmed of the potential victims of supernatural solicitings that they should be seen "going about their business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings, and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head, unobtrusively at first, then more insistently, until it holds the stage"[34]. Northrop Frye was to observe, "If the author fails to establish a familiar world he risks forfeiting our sense of fear"[35]. For, of course, the principal objective of the ghost story is to scare its readers who, as Virginia Woolf expresses it, are willing victims of that "strange, human craving for feeling afraid"[36] .

Nor are Le Fanu's ghosts transparent wraiths of the type one associates with illustrated editions of Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, for example; Justice Harbottle's hanged revenant is to all appearances and purposes similar to the living man, except that there is a blue mark around his throat, the sailor whom Captain Barton had flogged is a shrunken version of his former self; when Justice Harbottle has himself become a revenant, he appears dressed in his normal clothes down to the gold ring on his finger. The same applies to the Devil, in a little group of stories in which Le Fanu has his protagonist, generally a spendthrift with an estate he finds it impossible to keep up, make a bargain with the devil, not in exchage for knowledge as in the Faust story, but in exchange for money. Thus, in *The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh*, Sir Robert is always accompanied on the race-course by a man "who possesses some striking and unpleasant peculiarities of person and garb", and who, in a later manifestation as Sir Robert's valet, speaks several languages with equal fluency and has a scowl "half-demoniac, half-insane". In *Sir Dominick's Bargain*, the Evil One appears first as a French recruiting-officer in "a cocked-hat with gold lace

33.-Quoted by Julia Briggs, op. cit., p. 127.
34.-M.R.James: Introduction to *Ghosts and Marvels*, edited by V.M.Collins,Oxford, 1924.
35.-Julia Briggs, glossing N.Frye, op.cit., p. 18.
36.-Virginia Woolf: "The Supernatural in Fiction", *Collected Essays*, 2 vols., London, 1966, Vol.I, pp. 293-6.

round it" and finally as a "short square fellow with a cloak on, and long black hair bushin' out from under his hat"[37] , whilst in *The Dead Sexton,* "He looked like a gaunt, athletic Spaniard of forty burned half black in the sun, with a bony, flattened nose. A pair of fierce black eyes were just visible under the edge of his hat; and his mouth seemed divided, beneath the moustache, by the deep scar of a hare-lip"[38] . Weak, hesitant Philip Feltram, in *The Haunted Baronet,* after literally coming back from the dead as a ghost, comes back a far more solid, dominating and menacing figure than in his former life, when he was at best a wraithlike creature. Yet these rather solid spectres do posseses the conventional apparition's talent for making their way into their victims' shelters, however much they lock and bar their doors; such intrusions, indeed, constitute a leitmotiv in the short stories: this occurs in three stories concerning demonic bargains, as also in *Schalken the Painter* in which the demon lover enters through a window, causing a gust of air which slams the door to, and leaves Rosa's uncle locked out; in *The Familiar*, Captain Barton's body-guard gets up to look for an owl and likewise finds the door slamming behind him thus leaving his master to the mercy of his persecutor; in *Sir Toby's Will*, the ghosts of Sir Toby and of his disinherited son make their entrance into the home of the wicked brother in the guise of mourners, whilst the horrible dismembered hand which constitutes the supernatural soliciting in *Ghost Stories of the Tiled House,* a plump, white hand with pudgy fingers, is perpetually rapping at window-panes, pushing its fingers through holes, and hauling itself over window-ledges, until one day, when the master of the house opens the front door; "his arm was jerked up softly, as it might be with the hollow of a hand, and something passed under it, with a kind of gentle squeeze"[39] .

Concerning this "domestic insinuation" of the supernatural, it is worth noting that in most of Le Fanu's stories, an attempt is made on the part of the victims of the hauntings or of their friends or families to discredit these supernatural manifestations: in the *Authentic Relation...*, as was mentioned, the phantoms are at first thought to be real flesh and blood smugglers, Captain Barton's future father-in-law refuses to see his persecutor as anything but "a mischievous little mountebank", and Justice Harbottle, on seeing the ghost of the hanged man, asks his widow if he has a brother; the young man in *Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street* wonders whether the terrifying vision he sees at the window is "the creature of (his) fancy" or the invention of (his) poor stomach", and tries to dispel his horrors, as he says, "not by exorcism" but "by taking a tonic"[40] . Incidentally, in this story, a

37.-Bleiler: *Best Ghost Stories of J.S.Le Fanu*, p. 442
38.-Ibid., p. 389.
39.-Ibid., p. 404.
40.-Ibid., p. 364.

natural explanation is finally offered for one of the "disturbances", but, thanks to Le Fanu's subtle powers of suggestion, proves to be just as horrific as any supernatural one: several nights in succession, the young man has heard "a slow, heavy tread" descending the staircase for which a "monstrous grey rat" turns out to be responsible. It is, however, no commonplace rat:

> "for, laugh at me as you may, it fixed upon me I thought, a perfectly human expression of malice; and, as it shuffled about and looked up into my face almost from between my feet, I saw, I could swear it - I felt it then and know it now, the infernal gaze and the accursed countenance of my old friend in the portrait, transfused into the visage of the bloated vermin before me"[41].

The "old friend" in question is another hanging judge who had hanged himself on the stairs with his illegetimate daughter's skipping-rope!

As was mentioned, Le Fanu uses a sinister animal to embody a vengeful spirit on more than one occasion: in this story, in *The White Cat of Drumgunniol*, where a fierce white cat contains the vengeful spirit of a woman seduced and abandoned by Farmer Donovan, as well as in *The Familiar* in which "the grim and ill-favoured owl" which Captain Barton's fiancée keeps as a pet is the ultimate cause of his being left unprotected, as was mentioned, and indeed, may be identified with the dead sailor who is haunting him. In *Squire Toby's Will*, a thin, big-headed bulldog forces his company insistently on the old Squire's unscrupulous younger son, who is struck "irreverently" by "the likeness it presented to the chatacter of his father's fierce pug features"[42] - it is, as may be imagined, no mere coincidence or illusion!

Squire Toby's Will, like several other stories, belongs to the category of narratives concerning guilt and retribution, in which, as was suggested, the presence of the otherworld visitants is in some way justified, In this case, the supernatural soliciting is directed towards a guilty victim, but this does not occur in all the stories: in, for example, *Some Strange Disturbances...*, the young men who are persecuted by the ghost of an old man "with infernal lineaments of malignity and despair" on his "stony" face, and a rope round his neck, are completely innocent; we are to understand that this is the vindictive spirit of an Irish hanging judge who, having eventually hanged himself, is eternally desirous of haunting others to death. This malevolent spirit, we learn, has been responsible for the deaths of several tenants occupying his former bedroom, and he is on the point of putting a noose round young Tom's neck, when he manages to make a dash for it and escape.

42.-Ibid., p. 8.

This kind of gratuitously malevolent haunting heralds, for example, the end of M.R James's terrifying story, *Whistle and I'll Come to You, my Lad.*

Squire Toby's Will, in fact, constitutes a very interesting example of Le Fanu's treatment of supernatural intervention and elements. The basis of the story is the time-honoured one of a father passing over in his will an uncongenial elder son, to the benefit of a more sympathetic younger one, Charles, and contains, incidentally, a magnificent evocation of squirearchal brutality in the late eighteenth century. The story really concerns two guilty parties, and the effects of their guilt on both. On the one hand, the old squire who, unable to rest in his grave on account of his unjust treatment of his elder son, returns to haunt his younger son, by day, in the form of an ugly, stray bulldog, and by night, in the form of nightmares in which the repulsive hound conjures Charles, in the old squire's voice, to make some reparation to his brother. Squire Toby is the type, infrequent in Le Fanu, of the guilty ghost coming back to earth to try and make amends for some wrong committed whilst alive. The only other example of the situation in these stories is that of *Madame Crowl's Ghost*, in which the ghost of a grotesque old woman is seen, shortly after her death, by a young servant-girl opening a secret door in the wainscoting whose existence no one has ever suspected. Examination by daylight proves that the hidden recess contains the skeleton of the son of the widower Madame Crowl had married seventy years before, and who had disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Madame Crowl's restless ghost is thus drawing attention to her undiscovered guilt.

The other guilty party in *Squire Toby's Will* is Charles, who, following instructions given to him by his father in a nightmare, discovers a document proving the legality of his brother's claim to the estate, but, in spite of all this supernatural admonition, still decides to keep quiet about it. He begins to be "haunted by an indescribable anxiety", however, after being in coma after a fall from a horse, that is to say, in the type of physical circumstances which, according to Le Fanu's Dr. Hesselius, may inadvertently open the inner eye, upset the equilibrium of the brain fluid, and lend itself to all kinds of "spectral illusions". After the elder brother's funeral, two, as the servants believe, mourners, unobtrusively enter the house which from that hour onwards is "troubled" to such an extent that Charles ends up hanging himself in the very room where he had discovered the legal document whose existance he had so unwisely ignored.

Similarly, *The Familiar*, originally called *The Watcher*, deals, as has been mentioned, with an avenging spirit determined to pay back in his own coin the wrongs done to him in the past by Captain Barton, at the time the story opens, a quiet, sensible man, who has just become engaged. His familiar manifests himself first in the form of disembodied footsteps pursuing Barton at night through the deserted streets of Dublin, then by means of threatening letters, and, finally, by appearing in broad daylight, not

only to Barton, but also to his friends, including the clergyman-narrator, as "a man...short in stature" who "looked like a foreigner" and whose countenance and bearing inspire in those who see him "an undefined sense of danger"[43] . This revenant Barton recognises as a shrunken version of a sailor whose daughter he had seduced, and whom he had flogged so cruelly that he died of lockjaw in Naples. More and more depressed and frightened, Captain Barton tries to give his familiar the slip by going abroad, only to come face to face with him waiting for him on the quayside at Calais. He then hides away in a solitary Irish mansion, but the Watcher soon appears at the gates, and is later, as was mentioned, identified with the "ill-omened owl" which sails out of Barton's room when he is found dead, huddled in horror against the bedhead. Unlike that of the young squire, Barton's death is not self-induced: there is an indentation "as if caused by heavy pressure" near the foot of the bed, another detail exploited by M.R.James.

In the case of the hanging judge, in *Mr. Justice Harbottle,* suicide is again provoked by the agency of an avenging spirit, here, one Pyneweck, whom Harbottle has sentenced to death unjustly, and with whose wife he is secretly living. Much of the evocative power of this particular story derives from the Dantesque vision, or premonitory nightmare, which Harbottle has whilst nodding off in his carriage, of his own Last Judgement, attended by all those he has condemned to death in the past, and at which the judge who sentences him to be hanged on March 10th is in fact himself. The vision haunts the old man and he falls into "the vapours". Shortly afterwards, the shade of Pyneweck is seen in various parts of the house, and soon the judge is found hanging by the neck from the bannister at the top of the staircase: the jury brings in a verdict of suicide while in an "atrabilions state", but those to whom he had talked of his nightmare, seeing that this happened on March 10th., are not conviced. It is, therefore, a clear example of the guilt and retribution type of story.

Ultor de Lacey, an Irish legend, although written in the style of a historical romance, likewise exploits the theme of guilt with, in this case, retribution being visited on the descendants of a De Lacey ancestor who, in 1601, after the battle of Kinsale, had a distant relative and fugitive from the battle, Rodric O'Donnell, executed without mercy, the victim, on the gallows, swearing that after his death, he would blast "the greatness of the De Laceys". In the ancestral castle of the late 17th century Ultor de Lacey, an eery light illuminates the old Bell Tower, and Ultor and his two daughters are made aware of the sinister presence of stranger "dressed in a dingy suit, somewhat of a Spanish fashion", who eventually carries off the golden-haired young Una. Exorcism is performed in the hope of disenthralling the

43.-Ibid., p. 217.

maiden, but to no avail: she does not come back, although belated villagers swear that she may sometimes be met with on moonlight nights "singing snatches of old Irish ballads that seemed to bear a sort of resemblance to her melancholy fate"[44] .

This vaguely erotic theme was to be exploited more powerfully by Le Fanu in another demon-lover story, *Schalken the Painter*, in which the theme of guilt and retribution in not really present, or only insofar as a perhaps over mercenary uncle allows his penniless niece to marry an elderly and repulsive stranger on the strength of his wealth alone. The point of departure for this sombre story is a painting by the Flemish master, Godfrey Schalken, of an attractive white-robed and white-veiled maiden, with, in the background, a shadowy masculine figure, dressed in the old Flemish fashion, his hand on the hilt of his sword. The picture, we learn, records a remarkable and mysterious occurrence which Schalken had personally experienced; the arrival of an impressive stranger, about sixty years of age, and with "something indescribably odd,...in the perfect, stonelike stillness of the figure"[45] , asking for the hand of his master's niece whom, he says, he had seen and admired once in the Church of St. Lawrence at Rotterdam. He offers a very rich dowry, and the artist accepts, albiet rather uneasily. Until the contract is signed, Vanderhausen shows himself only in the shadowy studio at dusk, but at the celebratory, well-lit dinner, he is revealed as having a horrifying aspect: a face of a "bluish leaden hue", almost black lips, muddy-coloured eyes, "the entire character of the face (being) sensual, malignant and even satanic"[46]. The horrified fiancée remarks that he reminds her "of an old painted wooden figure" that used to frighten her in the Church of St Lawrence in Rotterdam! Nothing is heard of the ill-assorted couple until one evening, poor Rosa rushes into her uncle's studio, arrayed in a sort of shroud, demanding food and drink with a haggard expression and exclaiming repeatedly:"The dead and the living can never be one!"[47] . At her demand, a clergyman is called to pray over her, but, as was mentioned, her demon-lover, the resuscitated image, enters by a window overlooking the canal, and by a trick, drags her away. The ultimare horror occurs years later, when Schalken falls asleep in the Church of St.Lawrence and there has a vision of Rosa, dressed as he subsequently painted her, beckoning him into the crypt, which takes on the appearance of an old-fashioned Dutch interior, in the middle of which there sits "bolt upright" in a four-poster bed "the livid and demoniac form of Vanderhausen"!

44.-Ibid., p. 465.
45.-Ibid., p. 31.
46.-Ibid., p. 38.
47.-Ibid., p. 42.

There is an even higher component of eroticism in Le Fanu's pioneering vampire novella, *Carmilla*, which so impressed and influenced Bram Stoker, and is the first masterpiece of the genre. Its success depends to a great extent on its narrative technique, which is similar to that of *Uncle Silas*, for it is written in the form of a memorandum written by the girl, Laura, who all unawares was destined to become the prey of a female vampire: Carmilla, in other ages, anagramatically, Millarca and Mircalla, Countess Karnstein. The action takes place in Styria, near Austria (Central Europe being the natural habitat of the vampire), in a lonely but attractive castle, where Laura leads an idylic if rather solitary life with her father and two governesses. Their domestic peace is shattered by the accidental arrival of a beautiful but enigmatic young girl, about Laura's age, Carmilla. The reader becomes gradually aware by hints dropped that Laura herself fails to pick up, that this at times lively and attractive, but on occasions, languid, moody and difficult, girl, may well be connected with a vampire-attack Laura suffered as a child. There is a skilful, and considering the period in which Le Fanu was writing, daring identification between sexual possession and the vampire's desire to live on and in its victim. As V.S.Pritchett expresses it: "Carmilla displays the now languid, now insatiate, sterility of Lesbos"[48] . The heroine is too innocent to be aware of the implications of Carmilla's "hot kisses", and passionate expressions: "I live in you ; and you would die for me, I love you so"[49] , although she is embarrassed by them, even for a while wonders whether Carmilla is really a young man in disguise! Suspense mounts in the novella as local peasants are attacked again, and the locality is in a state of terror. Finally, Laura too is attacked again, and a half-mad vampirologist is brought in, which allows Le Fanu, through this personage, to write a little treatise on the customs of vampires and the modes of eliminating them. Carmilla finally disappears, leaving the by now well-protected Laura safe and sound. It is difficult to do justice to the density of this novella and to its sheer story-telling skill- suffice it to say that it has been laid open to several critical interpretations: for some readers, it is a tale of Lesbianism, for others, Carmilla represents the subconscious projection of Laura's dead mother, who was related to the Karnsteins, the projection being motivated by Laura's possible sense of guilt, her birth being the cause if her mother's death, for others it is simply a vampire story.

Interpretation is likewise left open in what is generally agreed to be Le Fanu's best ghost story, *Green Tea*. This, as was mentioned, is the first of the Dr. Hesselius case-book stories, narrated by the Doctor himself, and dealing with the possibly psychotic disorder of a patient of his whom, in fact,

48.-V.S.Pritchett: op.cit., p. 104.
49.-Bleiler: *Best Ghost Stories of J.S.Le Fanu*, p. 300.

the good doctor is too slow to save from himself - or from his tormentor, a small black monkey with eyes that glow red in the penumbra in which Mr. Jennings, the clergyman, first perceives it, a monkey who, as early as 1880, was being called by the critic, Richard Dowling, "the only probable ghost in fiction". Mr. Jennings is presented as a gentle, scholarly, man of a retiring disposition, the vicar of a country parish, who meets Dr. Hesselius socially, and being familiar with his scienctific work , asks him if he can consult him professionally. When Mr.Jennings has left the room, Dr Hesselius makes a series of correct deductions about his habits and pursuits, and aspects of the doctor's experience and professsional expertise which may well have given Conan Doyle the idea for Sherlock Holmes's famous talent for making similiar deductions. We thus learn that the good vicar (a bachelor) had at one time been engaged intensely in theological research (including the theories of Swedenborg), and that whilst writing his book at night, had become addicted to drinking large quantities of green tea, this providing, in Dr.Hesselius' opinion, a stimulant strong enough to open the inner eye and, as it were, release the subconscious. This leads, of course, to the question of whether Mr. Jennings is seeing a hallucinatory monkey, a product of his own imagination, or if his persecutor really comes from another world like Captain Barton's wizened little sailor. The difference in this story is that, as far as we know, Mr.Jennings has no guilty past, and that, therefore, there can be no question of justified retribution. For V.S.Pritchett, however, the monkey is "A very Freudian animal..Dark and hairy with original sin and symbolism, he skips out of the unchaste jungle of a pious bachelor's unconscious"[50] . According to this intepretation, and in view of his profession, Mr.Jennings' monkey would represent an exteriorization of his, presumably, repressed libido.

Be that as it may, this small black monkey is first perceived by Mr.Jennings, at dusk, in a horse-drawn omnibus just when, he says, he was leaning back in his corner ruminating pleasantly; nothing, therefore, could be more peaceful and more ordinary than this bus ride into which the tormentor suddenly obtrudes. The monkey accompanies Mr.Jennings home, and the clergyman, although in a panic, tries to persuade himself that it is "a spectral illusion", a well-known physical affection, a disease like smallpox or neuralgia. However, lucid and well-read man that he is, he already foresees what may be his horrific fate: "I had read of cases in which the appearence at first harmless, had, step by step, degenarated into something dreadful and insupportable, and ended by wearing its victim out"[51] . And this is exactly what happens - the monkey, although occasionally disapperaring violently up

50.-V.S.Pritchett: op.cit., p. 104.
51.-Bleiler: *Best Ghost of J.S.Le Fanu*, p. 195.

the chimney for days at a time, always comes back :"In all situations, at all hours, it is awake and looking at me. That never changes"[52]. By day it is black, by night it glows in a kind of halo, and it has an expression of "unfathomable malignity". At first content merely to watch Mr. Jennings, after a year or so it begins to grow more active and, indeed, starts to persecute him in church, springing from the altar-rails on to the Bible itself he is reading from, squatting there, preventing him from going on reading. The final stage in the persecution of Mr. Jennings, is that the monkey begins to speak to him "Yes, speak in words and consecutive sentences, with perfect coherence and articulation", but "it comes like a singing through my head"[52]. The monkey, with speech, grows more agressive and starts to tempt the vicar to take his own life, by throwing himsesf down an old mine-shaft, for example. It is at this point in the persecution, and when the monkey is in fact absent, that Mr.Jennings consults Dr. Hesselius, who offers him consolatory advice, assuring him that his condition can be treated, and that he will meditate on the best cure for the case. But Dr. Hesselius meditates too long, absenting himself from his lodgings in order to do so, and receives Mr. Jennings' SOS too late. By the time Dr. Hesselius arrives at Mr. Jennings'house, he has already cut his throat, and there is no monkey in sight, because, of course, for the doctor, there is no monkey, only a circulatory complaint of the brain due to the excessive abuse of green tea; but it is, indeed, a striking and haunting story; here, perhaps more than in any other of his truly terrifying evocations of the occult, the uncanny and the ominous, Le Fanu proves to us that Dr. Johnson was right, as usual, when he wrote of the belief in ghosts that "All argument is against it, but all belief is for it".

52.-Ibid., p. 200.
52.-Ibid., p. 200.