

## R. F. Foster, 'Protestant Magic in Irish Literary and Society

[...]V. S. Pritchett acutely characterized Le Fanu's ghosts as frightening because 'they can be justified: blobs of the unconscious that have floated up to the surface of the mind ... not irresponsible and perambulatory figments of family history, moaning and clanking about in fancy dress.' (Pritchett, *The Living Novel*, 1946, p.96.) This is true of more Irish ghost stories than Le Fanu's; and, particularizing further, the line of Irish Protestant supernatural fiction is an obvious one, though it has not been analysed as such. It leads from Maturin and Le Fanu to Bram Stoker and Elizabeth Bowen and Yeats—marginalized Irish Protestants all, often living in England but regretting Ireland, stemming from families with strong clerical and professional colorations, whose occult preoccupations surely mirror a sense of displacement, a loss of social and psychological integration, and an escapism motivated by the threat of a takeover by the Catholic middle classes—a threat all the more inexorable because it is being accomplished by peaceful means and with the free [90] legal aid of British governments. The supernatural theme of a corrupt bargain recurs again.

A strong theme in Protestant Gothic is a mingled repulsion and envy where Catholic magic is concerned. Notwithstanding, Yeats's continuing preoccupation with the occult did enable him to lay a claim upon Irishness, while retaining a hold upon his own marginalized tradition. His own occult short stories, like "Rosa Alchemica", aren't often enough seen as contributions to the Protestant Gothic tradition, continuing the Maturin-Le Fanu-Stoker theme of occultism as a strategy to compete with Catholicism, and to deal with the hauntings of Irish history (including spectres from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

The condition of the embattled Irish Protestant from the early nineteenth century was epitomised by figures like Charles Maturin, an eccentric but acute Dublin cleric and author, or another Huguenot-descended Irish intellectual, Sheridan Le Fanu. Le Fanu was a non-practising lawyer, conservative journalist and congenital depressive, who lived a reclusive life in Merrion Square, absorbed in Swedenborg and fears for Protestant Ascendancy. And what he and Maturin had in common is striking: both, in their successive generations, pioneered the nineteenth-century tradition of Irish supernatural fiction.

Maturin created *Melmoth the Wanderer*, published in 1820, a figure who echoes Faust and prefigures *Count Dracula*: the undead, wandering the world to claim the issue of a corrupt bargain. Le Fanu wrote numerous classic ghost stories and one authentic masterpiece, *Uncle Silas* (1864); though ostensibly set in Derbyshire, it was long ago spotted by Elizabeth Bowen as an Irish story in disguise, dealing with exploitation, imprisonment, fractured identity and hauntings. He was a devoted reader of Swedenborg, as was Yeats. Le Fanu is also responsible for a prototype lesbian vampire story, *Carmilla*. And this topic would later be carried on by yet another respectable Dublin Protestant, Abraham Bram Stoker. [...] Indeed, a strong theme in Protestant gothic is a mingled repulsion and envy where Catholic magic is concerned. The Jesuit order in Melmoth manipulates darker forces than the eponymous hero. In *Dracula*, Van Helsing is a Dutch Catholic who brings the Host, with a papal dispensation, to combat the undead at Whitby.

Yeats knew Stoker; he inscribed a copy of *The Countess Cathleen* to him in 1892, read *Dracula* with Ezra Pound, and was only put off a proposed visit to Dracula's original castle (though Yeats thought it was in Austria,—not Transylvania) by the outbreak of a world war in 1914. Equally Stokerish is Yeats's interest in Catholic versus Protestant magic. He wrote to Lionel Johnson in 1893: 'My own position is that an idealism or spiritualism which denies magic, and evil spirits even, and sneers at magicians and even mediums (the few honest ones) is an academical imposture. Your Church has in this matter been far more thorough than the Protestant. It has never denied *Ars Magica*, though it has denounced it.' (After 13 Jan. 1893; Kelly, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, pp.355-56).

'Protestant Magic: W. B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History' [1990], rep. in *Yeats's Political Identities*, ed. Jonathan Allison (Michigan UP 1996), pp.83-105; also in 'Protestant Magic', in *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish History and History* [Chap. 11] (London: Allen Lane 1993), pp.212-32.

By 1909, however, he had decided that the Protestant mind was readier to accept magic. The pedantry of Irish Catholic education, he wrote in his journal, 'comes from intellectual timidity, from the dread of leaving the mind alone among impressions where all seems heretical, and from the habit of political and religious apologetics. This pedantry destroys religion as it destroys poetry, for it destroys all direct knowledge. We taste and feel and see the truth. [220] We do not reason ourselves into it.' (*Memoirs*, ed. Donoghue, p.195-96).

This theme appears in the stories he published as *The Secret Rose*, where magical insight is defined against unthinking Catholicism. Here too there are echoes of Melmoth: the invented text, the esoteric book, the idea of esotericism as aristocratic domination, perhaps—for an Irish Protestant—the reclamation of an elite authority. 'The dead,' he once wrote, 'remain a portion of the living.' A critic as imaginative as Terry Eagleton might see the crowds of dead people whom Yeats or Elizabeth Bowen discern walking the roads of Ireland as the souls of dispossessed tenants. I do not; but, while accepting the Neo-Platonic and Swedenborgian pedigree of ideas about the dead partaking in the life of the living, the particular appeal of the supernatural for Irish Protestants deserves decoding.

Yeats was a man of his late nineteenth-century time in being influenced by the general occult revival of the late 1880s, unequalled until the 1960s. Eliphas Levi's *Mysteries of Magic* had been translated in 1886, Cornelius Agrippa's *Natural Magic* a few years later. An explosion of public interest in Rosicrucianism had affected Europe. MacGregor Mathers's *Kabbalah Unveiled* and A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* were sacred books for a certain element of the avant-garde. Sinnett's book was presented to Yeats by a Sligo Protestant aunt. There was a belief in a coming dawn of wisdom which would rout eighteenth century rationalism and nineteenth-century materialism. But Yeats already had his reasons for repudiating these beliefs: they had helped bring about the decline of the Protestant Ascendancy. And he had access to his own occult tradition too.

Irish occultism was often identified by Yeats, for public purposes, as part of the Celtic mind-set; but the superstitiousness of Irish Protestants was legendary. A fear of three candles burning together, or the unlucky colour green, or a hotel bedroom numbered 13, governed the private life of Charles Stewart Parnell. Roger Casement's father dabbled in spiritualism at Ballymena. Elizabeth Yeats would never allow her publishing company to begin printing a book on a Friday. In the house of Yeats's Pollexfen relations at Sligo, a long-dead great-grandfather and his four-year-old daughter, victims of the cholera, walked in the garden of an evening, and the dogs ran to greet them. The Dublin Protestant middle class had frequent recourse to fortune-tellers and wise women, long before AE and Yeats tried to bring them Theosophy, *séances* and astral travel in the 1880s. And Yeats early fellow occultist and schoolfriend, Charles Johnston, came from the last redoubt of protestant extremism, a Northern Irish Orange stronghold called Ballykilbeg: where, Yeats noted, 'everything was a matter of belief' in Protestant salvation and Catholic damnation.' (*Autobiographies*, 1955, p.91.)

It does not seem frivolous or irrelevant to locate Yeats in this context—Protestant marginalisation—as much as in the world of international occultism ... [&c.]; the supernatural dimension of the Irish Protestant subculture provided a further impulse—less personally, more historically derived and none which he shared with several similarly marginalised members of his increasingly marginalised class and caste.

—R. F. Foster, 'Protestant Magic', in *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish History and History* [Chap. 11] (London: Allen Lane 1993), pp.212-32; pp.219-22.