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Cover Page Footnote

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The relationship between an artist and reality is always an oblique one, and indeed there is no good art which is not consciously oblique. If you respect the reality of the world, you know that you can only approach that reality by indirect means.

(Richard

Wilbur)

If one consults an explanatory English dictionary for the word "fiction," the following two definitions are provided: 1. "books and stories about imaginary people and events" and 2. "something that people want you to believe it is true but which is not true" (Longman 514). Thus, if fiction can be delimited as an imaginative creation/world, intentionally illustrated as real and reliable by its author, then it is legitimate according to the definitions above to argue that fiction also equals falsehood or lie. Therefore the author, who effects a fictionalizing act, could be envisaged as a fabricator and a falsifier of truth, purposely concealing it. However, if one takes into consideration that a literary text must hide profundity and that this profundity can be grasped on the surface, then the truth deliberately cached by the producer of that text is very present in the veil obscuring it.

Fiction configures the real world by setting it in an unfamiliar if not strange context and although the reader might be able to recognize it, this world is not the original but remodeled according to a different set of regulations which function only inside the textual/fictive universe. Through the fictionalizing act, which can be defined in terms of a transition or a border violation, the real world is neither totally denied nor erased, but always referred to in an oblique manner. Thereby, every literary text becomes a dynamic play whose aim is not to simply represent a given or known truth, but to translate absence into presence, that is to shed light less on what is already recognized and more on what is ambiguous, and such ambiguity is to be activated by the imaginary content of the fiction.

One question arises at this point: can a reader ascertain a text's intentionality and an author's intention? In order to answer this question, a hypothesis must be elaborated and that is the hypothesis according to which, when an author like Sheridan Le Fanu envisioned and produced his *In A Glass Darkly*, he had the intention to comprise all the possible interpretations of his text. And yet, although the reader may fully rely on the author's ability to master his creation, the author can never be certain of the outcome.

Le Fanu's collection of novellas is a very good exemplification of the capacity of the writer to use his multi-faceted stories as a means of representing reality as a projection upon identity. And such identity is always discernible less as what it is and more as what it is not or what it could be. What constitutes identity? What are the major components that construct it? Identity – understood as sense of self – is the fundamental core of our interiorities, the quality that separates us from (the) others and that confers us uniqueness and authenticity. J. E. Malpas expresses an idea found in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, according to which the self can be truly ascertained through an exploration of the place and the space it resides in. The sense of place refers to an intimate and meaningful bond between people belonging to a specific community and geography, a mere reflection of the community's culture, aspirations and intellectual preoccupations (Malpas 1-6). The sense of self or the recognition of one's identity exists in the human mind also when the mind becomes active and dynamic, that is when it commences to know or to experience. The experience, both negative and positive, is the second element to shape identity, which is constantly subjected to mutations and recreations through the contact both with the world and the others. Therefore, we can argue that identity is never definite, but always historically, geographically and culturally constructed.

The closing novella of Le Fanu's collection, "Carmilla," contains an intended selection from a diversity of historical, geographical, cultural and social elements existing outside the text. It patterns the Irish reality by placing it in a peculiar, even ambiguous context in order to evidence that the aspects of things that possess a great significance for us are secreted because of their familiarity.¹ The difficulty that the reader is confronted with in the interpretative act is that the text does not contain precise references to Ireland, to Irish consciousness or Irish identity. Up to this point, I have detected a general critical tendency to place Le Fanu's text into a Victorian context only, without acknowledging the possibility of other interpretations, more faithful to the author's intentions. If we consider the valid assumption that identity is intimately related to geography (place) and experience, and that the sense of self is inevitably projected in an author's writing, then it is legitimate to argue that the author of "Carmilla" intended to subliminally communicate an Irish reality. The primary aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which Le Fanu contemplated the recreation of the Irish identity through the motif of the vampire-revenant incarnated by Countess Karnstein.

The story of the bloody countess was very successful as the author managed to re-animate a dying genre by both reinterpreting the myth of the lamia and performing a necessary revival in an ever-changing society. In her study of the Gothic body, Kelly Hurley defines the Gothic as "an instrumental genre" whose emergence is realized in "a

¹ In 1919 Sigmund Freud published his famous essay – *The Uncanny* – in which he made a clear distinction between "heimlich" (private, familiar or belonging to home) and "unheimlich" (uncanny, suspect, uneasy, repulsive, sinister, frightening, unfamiliar). This essay focuses on the effort to realize a connection between the two terms and to conclude that they are strongly related. According to him, what appears to be unfamiliar or uncanny has a powerful familiar character, its estrangement or alienation occurring as a result of repression.

period of high cultural stress” and which “negotiates the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises” (5). Therefore, the Gothic can be framed as a receptacle for all fears and panics concerning the mutations occurring in the present, scrutinized in a permanent conflict with the past. This conflict between past (tradition) and present (new values), translating the conflictual relationship between two modes of understanding the surrounding reality, is materialized in the strife between two (or more) (main) characters pertaining to antithetical worlds and exhibiting dissimilar systems of values.

The “classic” Gothic plot stages a hero pursued by a monstrous character (the villain) who is eventually unmasked and annihilated and whose evil machinations are explained by recurring to reason and common sense. With “Carmilla,” there is a fruitful alteration (variation) of the classic plot which portrays an orphaned girl as protagonist and who, in desperate quest of a mother (or a substitute) is pursued by a patriarchal figure (a father or a substitute). Le Fanu proposes a shift of accent from the hero belonging to the tumultuous and overwhelmingly changeful present to the monster who operates a crisis of identity. His novella does not simply inspect and elucidate supernatural incidents, but aims at penetrating a dangerous ground and at bringing to surface that which is beyond all awareness and conception, that which is hidden and repressed.

In the prologue, the narrator/editor and never protagonist of the entire collection cites Dr. Martin Hesselius, a German researcher of human behavior and soul who wrote an elaborate note on a mysterious subject (“a case-study”), described as “involving, not improbably, some of the profoundest arcane of our dual existence and its intermediates” (Le Fanu 239). The narrator-protagonist of the events to be recounted is an intelligent beautiful lady who, despite a close correspondence with the doctor, refrained herself from supplying him with any other details than the ones exposed in one of the doctor’s essays. The eventuality to meticulously reexamine this source’s reliability is removed since “she [who] probably could have added little to the narrative which she communicates in the following pages with such a conscientious particularity” (239) died in the meantime. As a consequence, the method of narrating the editor employs is the following: he copies the sources but with modifications of names, adaptation and translation of language to fit the mood and the content of the collection and with a few passage omissions. Such alteration, which is in fact a subjective selection, engenders ambiguity and an inadequacy between the intended meaning purposely hidden by the author’s text and the apparent one as displayed by the copy.

The series of events that constitute the plot of the novella are not located in Ireland or England, but in Styria, an Austrian province. Was Le Fanu’s choice of setting accidental or deliberate? A thorough research on the history of the Austrian province reveals a fascinating particularity that casts an elucidative light on the hermeneutic act. Presumably, the plot is set in nineteenth century Styria, a dependent territory subjected to the Habsburg dominion. According to A.J.P. Taylor, the Habsburg Monarchy, also known as the Austrian or Austro-Hungarian Empire, was “a vast collection of Irelands” (23) ravaged by perpetual frictions between the “centralizing monarchy” (25) and the

provinces, translated as constant conflicts between the territorial aristocracy (native) or the so-called “Magnates” (23) (mainly German) and “the national diversity” (25). One of the effects of such schism was a recurrent revolutionary activity, much of it bearing a social, political and national character. The Empire, ruled from Vienna, included Austrian Germans, Slovenes, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Croats, Hungarians, Romanians and Italians – all rallying against the imperial rule and attempting to achieve rights and independence (30). Curiously, although placed in a foreign context, the Styrian landscape bears striking resemblances to the Irish pastoral geography:

Nothing can be more picturesque or solitary. [The castle or schloss] stands on a slight eminence in a forest. The road, very old and narrow, passes in front of its drawbridge [...]. The forest opens in an irregular and very picturesque glade before its gate, and at the right a steep Gothic bridge carries the road over a stream that winds in deep shadow through the wood. (Le Fanu 240)

An examination of Irish history displays a fragmented Ireland (the North and the South) devastated by a persisting clash between two wills, the deeply rooted aspiration to establish an entirely autonomous Irish State separated from the United Kingdom, and the insistence on remaining dependent on the British Crown. At this point, the geographical and the historical similitudes shared by Ireland and Styria become highly transparent.

Another noticeable “coincidence” in the novella is that the narrator’s father is an Englishman who, after having finalized his career in the Austrian service, retired with his child to a secluded *schloss* in a forest, miles away from any inhabited village and in the neighbourhood of “the mouldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstein, now extinct, who once owned the equally-desolate chateau [...]” (241), the nearest inhabited schloss being that of “old” General Spielsdorf – a name of German resonance (mere coincidence?). Laura’s mother, a Styrian lady (later revealed as being of Hungarian origins and descended from the Karnsteins) died in her infancy, the girl being cared for by a good-natured governess, whose presence insufficiently compensated the loss of the mother. Such maternal deprivation implies a handicap (that of the narrator) and therefore it is a signal that reality is filtered through the eyes and mind of a disabled character who, by the internalization of such loss and lack, is prone to achieve a distorted but more profound understanding of that reality. The narrator emphasizes the solitude into which she was brought up, her sole companions being her old father and two women: Madame Perrodon and a “finishing governess” (241) – Mademoiselle De Lafontaine (names of French resonance).²

² The consequence of Laura’s upbringing in this particular company is “a Babel at which strangers used to laugh” (241). Laura’s mention of the Tower of Babel becomes very significant in the context of the novella since it suggests diversity of languages and cultures subsisting in the same place or environment.

In her narration, Laura reports a bizarre incident which occurred in her infancy, during the night at the age of six: neglected, the little girl woke up whimpering when, surprisingly, she noticed “a solemn, but very pretty face” (242) looking at her from the side of the bed. The stranger caressed her tenderly while the child, “delightfully soothed” (242), fell asleep again. However, the distressing sensation of two needles piercing her breast paralyzed her with terror and made her burst into a loud cry. The sensual lady vanished under the bed, only to return twelve years later. This incident portrays the first vampiric visitation of Mircalla (Carmilla), Countess Karnstein who, for a few moments becomes the substitute of the mother but just as quickly, however, metamorphoses into an anti-mother figure when she lustfully vamps the child’s breast. The vampire establishes with Laura an initial mother-child bond which will contribute to the latter’s choice of (homo) sexual identity and also to the further development of the plot, a development which will serve as a mask disguising the true meaning of the story.

If the Gothic genre, as argued earlier, is indeed intended as a tool for the expression of the crises emerging in a period of intense struggle (cultural, social, political and sexual) absorbing all abhorrence concerning identity and for an attempt to negotiate the frustrations occurring as a result of such crises, then Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” can be comprehended as a story about (changing) mentalities.

In the nineteenth century, there functioned efficiently certain rigid dichotomies according to which everything was differentiated and classified as the normal and the abnormal, the human and “the abhuman,” the pure and the impure etc. The unity of the human body contrasted with the “fragmented,” “permeable” body of the abhuman defined as threatening because of its “morphic variability” and its dangerous possibility of “becoming not itself, [but] becoming Other” (Hurley 3). Le Fanu intentionally inserted into the text the disturbing body of the Other in order to obscure the “real other” i.e. the real intentionality of his project. Therefore, in the novella, the figure of the vampire is employed as an instrument of investigation-interpretation and its presence becomes highly symbolic as its power arises from the intimate link between vampires and blood. Blood is, both culturally and textually, a fluid of major importance as it signifies “notions of family, race, religion and gender” (Hughes 241). The vampire which is a lifeless, soulless body brings death with its mouth and threatens to lethally infest the entire human race. Its presence no longer assures the safe circulation of pure blood, but produces the anxiety of racial contamination since the vampiric blood is a hybrid; in the vampire’s veins, there flows a mixture of human and monstrous blood.

Nineteenth-century England also bears an extremely significant resemblance to the nineteenth-century Austrian Empire. They both had a strong sense of their national and racial identity. In Victorian England, everything that was non-English or anti-English constituted a threat of contagion. Those who did not share the same confessions or beliefs or did not respect the same traditions were considered to belong to an inferior race, of barbaric or primitive manifestations. Ireland and countries that were part of Europe (especially Eastern Europe) were perceived as “the impure Other” whose diversity was undesirable in any way other than a spectacle, a means of displaying exotic fascinating geographies. For the conservative English, diversity was synonymous with

instability and confusion, with loss of national identity (Gelder 11). From a historical point of view, the nineteenth-century Austrian Empire is marked by the territorial aristocracy's (mainly Germans) numerous attempts to achieve hegemony over other non-German nationalities (e.g. Hungarian). Therefore, both the Irish and the peoples from the Austrian Empire share a fundamental attribute: they both have been oppressed throughout history by sovereign powers. In this particular context, Carmilla's foreignness (Hungarian and a vampire) is not accidental, as in her veins there flows a mutant blood threatening to annihilate racial purity and a well-defined national identity. Her blood, as the carrier both of racial similarities and differences, is conceived as contagious. Thus, Carmilla epitomizes the colonizer who aims at annihilating the "pure race" and creating a hybrid race to take over the world. Her ways are idiosyncratic and perceived as deviated from the norm: she has unusual eating practices; she purchases an amulet and worships Nature (Heathen beliefs); she can act both graciously and barbarously.³

Another transparent "coincidence" is related to the employment of the two major male figures in the novella: Laura's father and General Spielsdorf (most probably of German origin). Their desperate attempts to reestablish their dominance over the female figures are revelatory for the understanding of the function that they fulfill inside the textual world: they clearly become the embodiment of the Oppressor, of the absolutist. General Spielsdorf makes three efforts to reaffirm his authority. Firstly, when he surprises Carmilla in the act of feeding, he strikes at her with a sword but "[he] saw her standing near the door, unschated. Horrified, [he] pursued, and struck again. She was gone and [his] sword flew to shivers against the door" (307). Secondly, he assaults her in the graveyard with a hatchet, but again, the blow is not effective. Thirdly, assisted by Laura's father, the General restores Carmilla's soul to eternal peace by driving a stake through her heart and by decapitating her. In these scenes, there is a proliferation of sharp instruments (sword, hatchet, stake), an imagery closely connected to the exorcistic rites and the exasperatedly employed Freudian motif of castration. In Le Fanu's text, the symbolic castration (i.e. the vampire's decapitation) can be interpreted in terms of loss of identity.

The novella ends with Laura's melancholic phantasm: "[...] and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door" (315). The male figures of the narrative completely annihilate Carmilla by rescuing the protagonist from the inescapable plague of blood and eternal darkness. However, although the reader might anticipate the restoration of a reassuring order and the erasing of a jeopardizing chaos, Laura's last desolate reverie betrays an irreversible damage and failure. Her father, after the bloodthirsty Countess's destruction, takes her

³ Carmilla's bestiality is revealed to the reader in the episode of her confrontation with the old man who ridicules her "sharpest tooth – long, thin, pointed, like an awl, like a needle." For the first time in the novella, Carmilla displays an acute manifestation of aggression, remnant of the barbarians' methods imposed for wrongdoing: "How dares that mountebank insult us so? Where is your father? I shall demand redress from him. My father would have had the wretch tied up to the pump, and flogged with a cart-whip, and burnt to the bones with the castle brand" (Le Fanu 265).

on a one-year journey through Italy in order to rehabilitate her, but does he really achieve this goal? Is he truly capable of completely deleting this experience, or will Laura subsist with it for the rest of her life? Unfortunately, the reader is not provided with possible answers to these questions (although he may use his intuition to answer them) and at this point, we can draw the inference that the only one responsible for such nonsuccess is the author himself who opted to murder the main informant and thus obstruct any openness towards the future.

There are a few questions arising at this concluding point that are vital for the grasp of the ways in which Sheridan Le Fanu employed his characters in order to communicate an Irish experience. What possible parallelism can be drawn between Carmilla and Ireland? How is Carmilla's "Hungarianness" related to Irishness? A first feasible connection between the application of the vampire figure and Le Fanu's intention of conveying an Irish experience lies in Carmilla's vampiric nature. She is a monstrosity – always perceived as marginal, peripheral identity and defined in connection with the norm, i.e. what is considered to be right and righteous. Being the marginalized Other, Carmilla becomes synonymous with "being Irish," its "different" identity being inscribed within her idiosyncratic ways. Although there are not explicit references to Ireland or Irishness in the novella, the author manages to reinvent Irishness through the concept of solidarity or union with the persecuted. Sheridan Le Fanu's novella puts forward an Irish experience by condensing in the perturbing body of Carmilla what could be coined as the colonizer (colonized)'s dread of the colonized (colonizer).

Unsurprisingly, the reader does not seem to experience a feeling of relief that the troublesome story reaches its end, simply because with it, their own story ends. As W. Schapp put it in his *In Geschichten Verstrickt*, "[...] the story of my life is a segment of the story of your life; of the story of my parents, of my friends, of my enemies, and of countless strangers. We are literally 'entangled in stories'." (qtd. in Ricoeur 6). One final relevant interpretation for the author's intention/intended meaning is possible: the real life and its truth are inside the fictive world. The ending carries in its signification the sense of redemption referring to the forgiveness or the absolution for past sins and protection from eternal damnation (possible through Carmilla's exorcism understood as deliverance from the colonizer's oppressive chains).

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