Fin-de-siècle Gaelic Gothic: Reflections on the Irish Question

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This paper offers a commentary on the existing relationship between racial theories and literary genres within a Victorian *fin-de-siècle* framework. While it is generally acknowledged that literature reflects the values and assumptions of the society that creates it, this paper will focus on the manner in which racial theory draws on literary genres and, in this instance, on the gothic genre. Specifically, it seeks to examine how the Victorian sciences and pseudo-sciences of ethnology, physiognomy and epidemiology drew upon the demonology of the gothic in order to classify racial relations on a hierarchical plane. Particular focus will be given to racial descriptors of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon races, operating within a nineteenth-century colonial context. These observations will be applied to a well-known *fin-de-siècle* novel written by an Irish author, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (first published in 1897). This novel was chosen as it articulates a paradox of racial difference that, it could be argued, is particularly pertinent to the author's Irish background.

Reading *Dracula*, we can observe that otherness is explored in terms of the trope of visibility. However, the other is distinguished not just in terms of visible difference, but also in terms of invisible difference. While tropes of savagery and bestiality account for visible difference, tropes of infiltration and contagion are called upon to account for invisible difference. The *fin-de-siècle* spectre of degeneration looms over both. We can note, for example, that while the Count's otherness is discernible to the naked eye, he is also adept at blending into his surroundings. He makes himself for the most part indistinguishable from the other denizens of the colonial metropolis. Moreover, he is a figure that represents an otherness that can infect, corrupt and ultimately destroy. His parasitic appetite

seeks its own growth by gorging on the healthy and pure, ultimately destroying the host body. The trope of contagion which so aptly describes the Count's presence in imperial London finds a parallel in nineteenth-century biological theories of race, which depicted the 'Irish as disease-carriers, the pollutants of the modern city' (Gibbons 2004, 43). As such, the influence of nineteenth-century race theories on the writing of Stoker's novel, are traceable and will be accounted for here.

A brief definition of physiognomy is pertinent to begin. Essentially, the term refers to the 'art cum science of judging character and temperament from the features of the head, the body, and the extremities' (Curtis 1971, 3). So, the Aristotelian assumption that the soul and body sympathise with each other underlies all theories of physiognomy. Looking at the general landscape of Victorian literature, we encounter numerous passages whereby writers sought to inform their readers about the personalities and character of their protagonists by means of concise but memorable descriptions of their physical traits. We might think of the infamous first meeting of Sherlock Holmes with his arch-nemesis Professor Moriarty. In this encounter, Moriarty rather haughtily remarks 'You have less frontal development than I should have expected' (Conan Doyle 2009, 158). Similarly, in Oscar Wilde's only novel, it is Dorian Gray's purity of expression that keeps his mask of respectability in place and serves to rebuke any who would attempt to discredit him. In Aristotelian terms, Dorian's enemies, unaware of the portrait that bears the burden of his depravity, cannot grasp the divorce of body and soul that these circumstances dictate. We also see these assumptions in operation in Stoker's *Dracula*, where both Jonathon Harker and his wife Mina deduce much of the Count's nature from the supposed 'cruelness' of his mouth, the protrusion of his teeth, and his excessive pallor. Conversely, Mina declares her ability to divine strength of conviction in Van Helsing due to

the notable bushiness of his eyebrows. Significantly, her observation does not draw derision from the man of learning. Rather, as Stoker writes:

> He seemed pleased, and laughed as he said, "So! You are a physiognomist [...] sir, you will pardon praise from an old man, but you are blessed in your wife [...] [s]he is one of God's women fashioned by His own hand" (Stoker 1993, 170).

Observations such as these, made by respectable Victorian figures, assured of their own racial superiority, reflect the increasing tendency of Europeans to rank the races of the world on the basis of cephalic, facial and chromatic indexes. It need hardly be added that such indexes tended to flatter the image of the beholder at the expense of those being stereotyped. While general physiognomical assumptions therefore are commonplace within Victorian literature, I would argue that explorations of physical appearance in *Dracula* are invested with additional layers of significance due to the nationality of his author. Accepting this, the racial hierarchies that typify Victorian sciences such as physiognomy and ethnology are thus germane to an analysis of the novel.

It was the influential Dutch physiognomist Pieter Camper who devised what became known as the 'facial angle theory' in order to differentiate between the skulls (and as a corollary, the intelligences), of *quadrumana* such as monkeys and orangutans from the various races of man. The facial angle in question was formed by the intersection of two lines, one running diagonally or vertically from the forehead to the foremost point of the front teeth or incisors, and the other running horizontally from the opening of the ear to the nostrils. The simple calculation allowed Camper to create a scale of animal and human evolution from primitive to civilised life, measuring each stop on the way via the size of the facial angle in each category. Jaw measurements were a decisive factor here. Prognathous individuals (people with protruding jaws) were associated with primitivism in the same manner that orthognathous individuals (or people with straight or nearly vertical jaws) represented a greater degree of civilisation.

Camper's studies ranged from measurements of a tailed monkey's skull which measured 42˚ to an idealized Roman bust which measured an anatomically unlikely 95˚. His findings revealed that the European skull demonstrated a higher facial angle (typically between 70˚ and 80˚) than their non-European counterparts. Camper's studies were later utilised in tracts of scientific racism, in particular after Darwin's evolutionary theories gained popular acceptance; if human beings were descended from apes, then surely a prognathous jaw implied inferior development and a lesser degree of civilisation. This study is highlighted in order to shed light on some of the changing attitudes of Victorians towards the Celtic race that occurred from the mid-1860s onwards. What took place in this period was a change in the stereotypical image of 'Paddy,' the ineffectual, amusing, and somewhat sentimental stage-Irishman of the previous century into a violent Celtic Caliban or simianised agitator.

A good starting point for measuring this change and observing the increasingly prognathous jaw of Paddy can be found in political satirical cartoons. The art of political caricature operates as a form of graphic stereotype that is largely informed by physiognomical study. As such, it is uniquely equipped to articulate this process of racial stereotyping. Furthermore, an examination of these graphic representations illustrates the degree to which racial theories in the latter half of the nineteenth-century drew increasingly on the gothic genre in order to characterise the tense political relations between Ireland and England and the increasingly familiar stereotypes of the prognathous Celt and the orthognathous Anglo-Saxon. The titles of these cartoons – 'The Irish Frankenstein' (1843, 1869, 1882), 'The Irish Vampire' (1885), 'The Fenian Pest' (1866), 'The Irish Devil-Fish' (1881)[1] and so on, clearly demonstrate the altered tenor of racial description.

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[1] All illustrations mentioned here are included in Curtis, L.P. 1971. *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian caricature.,* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

The racial other becomes the gothic threat as the Celt is increasingly described in monstrous, animalistic or pathological terms. Analysing the facial features of these Celtic figures reveals that the simianisation of Paddy is very much in evidence. Common features include a simous nose, a long projecting upper lip, shallow lower jaw and fang-like teeth. These ape-like features clearly indicate a 'primitive' nature. In Darwinian terms, simian Paddy is clearly a creature from the lower branches of the metaphorical evolutionary tree. The fact that the cartoon shorthand of racial caricature could be instantly conveyed and recognised, demonstrates the broad knowledge base of the messages embedded within. The proliferation of these images and the large readerships of publications such as *Puck*, *Judy*, *Punch* and *Tomahawk*, articulates an at least partial acceptance of the assumptions underlying them.

There are numerous reasons for the changing stereotype of the Celt in the Victorian imagination. Firstly, there was the flood of post-Famine Irish immigrants into Britain. A conservative estimate of the famine decade of the 1840s, suggests a figure of a million casualties and a further million emigrants to Britain and America. As these emigrants were usually malnourished and diseased; the identification of the Irish as a 'diseased stock,' a 'degenerate' or 'doomed' race was thus established. This changing characterisation of the Celt represents a move away from environmentalist theories that held Celts and Anglo-Saxon to be fundamentally alike. In this period, pathologies of racial otherness represented Celtic immigrants as parasitical invaders, who ought to be kept in check. Political events such as frequent rebellions and chronic agrarian unrest in Ireland fed the notion that the Irish Celts were a people whose natures were antithetical to English norms of thought and behaviour. Instances of violent behaviour and opposition to authority were read in terms of racial rather than individual character. Furthermore, Charles Stuart Parnell's land reform agitation led to an image of an increasingly politicised Paddy who was even more bestial and simian

than before. Parnell was incidentally depicted as a principally gothic threat; cartoons of this era portray the Anglo-Irishman as both a vampire and a doubled Jekyll and Hyde character. This characterisation of a prominent, and significantly, Protestant Irish politician is a noteworthy development on the tendency to demonise the lower class and Catholic rebels. As Luke Gibbons remarks, 'Irish constitutional politics merges with political insurgency [here] in a form of racial paranoia that construes violence itself as a product of the Irish national character' (2004, 81).

While colour difference was a key marker of racial and cultural difference in many colonial situations, the lack of perceptible difference between the colonial Irish and Victorian subject, if anything, intensified the awfulness of the encounter. We could consider the horrified account written by Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley, who tells his wife in a letter of his travels through Ireland and his repulsive encounters with the natives:

> I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country [...] But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours (qtd. in Gibbons 1996, 150).

Though difference is insisted upon in the repetition of the word chimpanzees, thus reiterating the bestial character of the colonial Irish, the actual objection here is, at issue, one of sameness. Thus far, verbal and pictorial representations of a perceived 'primitive' or 'bestial' Celtic race have been surveyed. It would be a vast over-simplification however, to assume that these images were either, wholly internalised, or simply disregarded. Certainly, what they did engender was a sharpened appreciation of the power of representation to distort reality and shape public opinion. Furthermore, while it would be erroneous to blurring the relationship between the material and discursive practices of materialism, it is

necessary to acknowledge the pernicious effects of such tracts. As Ania Loomba maintains:

> The linkage between photographic images, ethnographic and quasiscientific data gathering, census taking and colonial policy underlines the intricate, subtle and even contradictory, connections between colonial representations, institutions and policies [...] From the very beginning, the use of arms was closely connected to the use of images (1998, 86).

At this juncture, it should be stressed that this article draws on these images, not in order to identify instances of colonial blame or suffering, or in order to establish patterns of guilt or victim-hood within the novel. Much work in this vein has been done by postcolonial scholars. Seamus Deane would, for example, allegorise Dracula as a decadent Anglo-Irish blood sucking aristocrat whose economic practices bleed his tenants dry (1999, 90). However, the Count's 'coffin ship' mode of conveyance that Deane notes to support this identification is also suggestive of the pauperized Irish peasantry that such a figure would exploit.

As Stephen Arata neatly summarises: 'Dracula suggests two equations in relation to English-Irish politics: not just, Dracula is to England as Ireland is to England, but, Dracula is to England as England is to Ireland' (1990, 634). Nor do I wish to conflate the figure of Dracula with Stoker himself, though Clougherty and others insist that the 'parallels between Dracula's and Stoker's situations in London are unmistakeable' (Clougherty 2000, 149). Such studies are all very interesting and indeed worthwhile. However, the intention here is not to allegorise the novels into a colonial master-slave narrative. There is a frequent criticism of postcolonial inquiry, which indicts it as being a discourse that foments recrimination and victim-hood. The more modest aim of this study is merely to assert that an Irish writer such as Stoker, as a colonial living within the Imperial metropolis, necessarily had a more heightened awareness of the distorting power of representation, and of racial representation particularly, than might be expected of the average Victorian subject. As a member, albeit a relatively privileged

member, of a group subject to intense racial prejudice discrimination, he would no doubt attain a degree of scepticism with regard to systems of representation. This would affect the writing of *Dracula*.

As the survey of comic art demonstrates, popular Victorian stereotypes of the Celtic race in the latter half of the nineteenth-century draws on the demonology of the gothic to represent their colonial others as bestial, sub-human and monstrous. Their otherness is conveyed here through the expression of extreme and observable physical abnormality. Continuing on now, we can observe how tropes of visible and invisible otherness operate within Stoker's *Dracula*. In the novel, much attention is given to the repulsion felt by the vampire hunters on beholding the blood-sucking Count. It seems therefore, that it is his abnormal appearance that denotes his otherness. Jonathon Harker's first impression of the Count refers to his 'marked physiognomy' and stresses his anomalous features, from the unusually pointed ears to the hair that grows on the palm of his hands. These aberrant features cause Harker to shudder involuntarily and to experience nausea. Such a description echoes the findings of nineteenth-century criminologist Cesare Lombroso whose studies suggested that criminality, primitivism and even vampiric tendencies were connected and could be detected and accounted for anatomically. Lombroso writes:

> I seemed to see all of a sudden [...] the problem of the nature of the criminal – an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals. Thus were explained anatomically the enormous jaws, high-cheek bones, prominent superciliary arches, solitary lines in the palms, extreme size of the orbits, handle-shaped or sessile ears found in criminals, savages and apes, insensibility to pain, extremely acute sight, tattooing, excessive idleness, love of orgies, and the irresistible craving for evil for its own sake, the desire not only to extinguish life in the victim, but to mutilate the corpse, tear its flesh and *drink its blood* (2002, 388).

The Count seems to satisfy Lombroso's profile on a majority of counts (as do, incidentally, our Celtic Calibans). Indeed, Stoker's Mina Harker clarifies this

view in declaring unambiguously, '[t]he Count is a criminal and of criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him, and qua criminal he is of an imperfectly formed mind' (Stoker 1993, 303). Similarly, head vampire hunter Van Helsing stresses the link between the Count's inherent criminality and primitivism and, as a consequence, his physical abnormalities. In the rather peculiar idiom that Stoker creates for the Dutchman, he declares:

> This criminal has not full man brain. He is clever and cunning and resourceful, but he be not of man stature as to brain. He be of child brain in much. Now this criminal of ours is predestinate to crime also. He, too, have child brain, and it is of the child to do what he have done (1993, 303).

From these passages, it seems that the Count, with his abnormal physiognomy can be clearly distinguished from the rest of civilised and respectable society. *Pace* Lombroso, this physical irregularity speaks to an inherently criminal nature, one that (again taking the cue from Lombroso's profile) will extend to blood-sucking and murder.

But there is a problem here. Despite the insistence on visible and identifiable otherness, the real horror that Dracula represents is that he will succeed in passing himself off unnoticed and thrive within civilised society. His years of planning, of studying maps and train timetables, of perfecting his English and poring over his English Bradshaw's Guides, are all directed to the aim of concealing his racial otherness. As he explains to Jonathon Harker: 'I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pauses in his speaking if he hears my words, 'Ha, ha! A stranger!'' (Stoker 1993, 26). The problem is the Count's potential, and not his inability, to blend in unseen in his adopted metropolis. The vampire-hunter's desire to kill the Count stems from their horror at Dracula's successful incursion into Victorian society. In his diary, Harker's expressed terror is that:

> [t]his was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless (Stoker 1993, 52).

Up to this point, the Count's otherness has been considered in terms of visibility. Now it is necessary to turn to the issue of *invisible* otherness.

Having been made aware of the Count's criminality and evil intentions in the novel, comments about his primitivism and underdeveloped mental faculties are introduced and become common. However, it should be noted that in his initial dealings with Dracula, Jonathon Harker repeatedly attests to the Count's intelligence, foresight, capacity for rational planning, applied study, and improvisation, all of which refute the 'child brain' theory. If the Count's evil is written in the lines of his face, the shape of his skull and the degree of melanin in his complexion, then this too it seems, is not immediately apparent. Consider for a moment, Mina Harker's first sighting of Dracula in Hyde Park. While her husband stands frozen in fear, Mina, who is herself an amateur student of the physiognomical writings, takes the time to examine in detail the figure in front on her. She notices that the man's 'face was not a good face' as she stares at the 'dark man' in Hyde Park, and she does experience some degree of fear (Stoker 1993, 156). However, she admits that this apprehension is not in fact inspired by the Count but is rather founded on the fear that other people will notice the bizarre behaviour of her husband as he stares at the stranger. In this moment then, it is not Dracula's face that terrifies her, but Harker's. It is only after she reads Harker's diary that Mina learns to truly fear the features of the Count and to retrospectively classify his physical appearance in terms of marked difference.

Other signs of uncertainty appear within the narrators' attempts to delineate vampiric otherness. There are the hands of the Count, which Jonathon admits initially, seem 'rather white and fine' but upon closer inspection are shown to be 'coarse, broad, with squat fingers' (Stoker 1993, 23). Similarly, the vampire

women are initially thought to be beautiful but later revealed to be terrible. If the Count's face is as perceptibly *other* as Harker claims, it is somewhat surprising too that he should not be able to recognise that the driver who brought him to the castle, is in fact the same person as the host who invites him in.

As an Irishman living in the colonial metropolis it is safe to assume that Stoker was, if not subject to, than at least aware of the biases and prejudices surrounding his own colonial background. Through simple narrative, inconsistencies such as confused dates, and contradictory accounts of events, it can be argued that Stoker subtly questions the reliability of his multiple narrators. Furthermore, the novel's unusual narrative structure means than no individual character is assigned the role of controlling narrative voice. In this manner, the author is afforded an opportunity to distance himself from the palpable ethnocentrism and xenophobia of his not always reliable narrators. Jonathon Harker, in a end note to the novel that thus reveals his identity as final editor of the collected materials it comprises, curiously admits 'that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document' (Stoker 1993, 335).

Stoker, as an Irishman is well-positioned to appreciate that insistences on visible otherness operate as a defensive manoeuvre, a constructed difference to mask the more deep-rooted fear of sameness. As Gibbons perceptively remarks:

> For Stoker – and for late Victorian culture – race was essentially a matter of blood, and the ease with which Count Dracula enters the mainstream of British society plays on anxieties about its relationship to disease, heredity and cultural intermixing' (2004, 78).

Clearly then, it is the Count's ability to pass himself off as a respectable gentleman that represents his threat to civilized society. I would argue that in the divergent and even contradictory aspects of the Count's otherness, an otherness that is at once visible and invisible, apparent and undetectable, Stoker exhibits a knowledge that the efforts made by pseudo-sciences such as physiognomy or

phrenology to classify human beings on scales of civility, primitivism, criminality or respectability are inherently flawed. Similarly, he manages to suggest that these efforts invariably reveal more about their author than the figures they seek to delineate. This realisation is encoded in the novel in that much cited moment in the novel where Jonathan Harker stares into the shaving glass expecting to see the figure of the Count, but sees only his own image reflected within.

Stoker would have been aware that all the efforts to identify perceptible physical differences between Celts and Anglo-Saxons signified a defensive manoeuvre by a nation horrified at their external likeness to their troublesome neighbour. The simple truth of the matter was, on a level of external physical appearance, Celts were largely indistinguishable from Anglo-Saxons, a fact that did little to lessen the horror they could inspire.

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