SHERIDAN LE FANU'S *UNCLE SILAS* (1864): AN IRISH STORY TRANSPOSED TO AN ENGLISH SETTING

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The XIX-century Irish novelist Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu is probably less known to XX-century readers on account of his own merits as a writer than because of his influence on others. His short story *Carmilla* (1872) inspired Bram Stoker's vampire novel *Dracula*; his tale *A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family* (1839) furnished Charlotte Brontë with the idea for *Jane Eyre*, and Joyce incorporated part of his novel *The House by the Churchyard* (1863) in *Finnegans Wake*.

Nevertheless, *Uncle Silas*, the novel I have chosen to discuss, has always enjoyed considerable success. The book has remained in print ever since it first came out in 1864 and, though published half a century after the Gothic mode had faded, it has usually been read, and critically examined, as a novel of mystery, within the context of *English* Gothicism. Thus, the blurb of a 1966 American edition of the novel announces: "Perhaps no other writer in the history of English fiction so completely mastered the technique of creating an atmosphere of unrelieved suspense and terror" [1]. E.F. Bleiler, in his introduction to *Best Ghost Stories of J.S. Le Fanu* (1964) claims that *Uncle Silas* is the Victorian mystery story par excellence, being superior to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* in atmosphere, intelligence, and emotional power. Franz Rottensteiner, in *The Fantasy Book*, considers that "Sheridan Le Fanu was perhaps the most important of all the Victorian ghost story writers" [2] and Colin Wilson —who doesn't even mention the writer's Irish provenance— says in *The Strength to Dream* that "[Le Fanu's] neglect in England is astonishing, for he is the only great writer on the supernatural that this country has ever produced." [3] On the other hand, David Punter, in his excellent study of Gothic fiction *The Literature of Horror* states that "the year 1864 saw the publication of a novel which could fairly be regarded as the first properly Gothic masterpiece in England since *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*." [4], and he adds that "there is very little historical or political interest in his 'super-natural' novels, for they are consciously and almost resignedly archaic." [5]

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Now, interesting as the novel is as a chilling thriller, with many of the staple ingredients of the Gothic genre: the first-person heroine narrator —a helpless heiress preyed on by unspeakable terrors—, a villain, a haunted house, a mysterious murder, etc., I believe it is mistaken to include *Uncle Silas* in the context of the history of the English Gothic novel, just because the book was published in England and has an English setting, for this was quite incidental, and purely determined by economic pressure (after the poor sales of his earlier novels, Le Fanu managed to negotiate a contract with the English editor Richard Bentley, who insisted on his writing a story with an English subject and set in modern times). But in fact, the plot of *Uncle Silas* is an expanded version of two earlier stories by Le Fanu, both with an Irish setting: *Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess* and *The Murdered Cousin*, published anonymously in 1838 and 1851.

As the subtitle of this paper implies: AN IRISH STORY TRANSPOSED TO AN ENGLISH SETTING —a comment on *Uncle Silas* made by another Anglo-Irish novelist, Elisabeth Bowen, in 1947—, there are in Le Fanu's novel many elements that reveal an indirect but unmistakable Anglo-Irish provenance, that reflect the author's own personal experiences and pessimistic cast of mind as well as the position of the Ascendancy (i.e. Irish Protestants of English stock who enjoyed social and political power). Though Sheridan Le Fanu made use of the Gothic strain to great effect, he was, as W.J. McCormack has shown in the first comprehensive biography of the writer [6], strongly affected by the political turmoil of XIX-century Ireland. Events such as Catholic Emancipation, the Tithe War, the Famine, the Land War, Fenianism, the Home Rule movement, and especially his own position as a member of the progressively declining Protestant Ascendancy, inevitably shaped his world view and his literary output. Therefore, my purpose here will be to consider *Uncle Silas* first and foremost as an Irish, or rather Anglo-Irish, novel. This may sound somewhat paradoxical, because a common trend in the critical approach to XIX-century Irish fiction has been a recurrent emphasis on the mimetic aspect of the books, i.e. they have been judged according to how they portray Irish society rather than for their own literary merits [7]. However, quite surprisingly, this has not been the case with Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, and James M. Cahalan himself seems to advocate such a reading when he says:

> Le Fanu's shadowy Gothicism was the result of his defensive view of Irish history and politics as well as his own personal failure and pessimism. [8]

Now, in order to trace the "Irishness" in the book, my approach will be mainly biographical and historical in focus. Therefore, I shall start with an outline of the author's life and times, followed by a brief comment on the Anglo-Irish novel, that will serve as a frame of reference for the latter analysis of the novel *Uncle Silas*.

Sheridan Le Fanu was born in Dublin in 1814, in fairly auspicious circumstances. The stormy events of the insurrection of 1798, the Act of Union and dissolution of the Irish Parliament in 1800, Emmet's rebellion in 1803 and the

Napoleonic wars were past and the city was enjoying the prosperity of the wartime boom. On his mother's side he was descended from the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and his father's family were of Huguenot origin, i.e. French protestants, who had emigrated to Ireland in the XVIII century, and who soon became assimilated into the privileged ascendancy of the merchant class and the clergy of the established Church of Ireland. Moreover, one year after the novelist's birth, his father, the Reverend Thomas Le Fanu was appointed chaplain of the Royal Hibernian Military School in the Phoenix Park, the emblematic centre, together with Dublin Castle, of power and privilege. Thus, when in 1821, seven-year-old Le Fanu was fascinated by the orderly pageantry of the ceremonies organized during George IV's visit to Dublin, he knew nothing of the disturbances in the countryside, caused by the eviction of farmers and the growing agitation for Catholic emancipation.

However, the year 1826 was to be a turning point in his life, for the family moved to Abington, a parish on the borders of the counties of Limerick and Tipperary, of which Rev Thomas Le Fanu had been appointed rector, and during this period of rural exile, Le Fanu must have realised how artificial and shaky was their status in local society. Although they represented the official Church and their glebe-house was the finest building in the district, the father's income was very meagre and his congregation numbered about sixty, approximately one per cent of the parish's total population. Moreover, far from bringing agitation to an end, Catholic Emancipation (i.e. the granting of freedom of worship to Roman Catholics achieved in 1829) released a lot of violent antagonism, in the form of boycott and assassinations, against the representatives of the Established Church, for the poor masses of Roman Catholics were still required to pay Tithes —taxes— to it. The violence that pervaded rural Ireland in the late 20s and 30s and which surrounded the previously safe glebe-house of the Le Fanu family, together with the tragic blow caused by the death of the writer's beloved sister Catherine, would leave indelible traces in his fiction. Thus, in his first collection of stories, *The Purcell Papers*, the parish priest narrator, while riding in Co. Tipperary, looks at the "broad sea of corn fields" illuminated by the setting sun and exclaims with tears in his eyes: "Alas my country! what a mournful beauty is thine; dressed in loveliness and laughter, there is mortal decay at thy heart!" [9]. On the other hand, irrespective of the location and period in which his later stories are set, the isolated Big House, disturbed by intruders and acts of violence, and doomed to decay, is a recurrent image in his fiction (e.g. in *Uncle Silas* marauders suddenly appear in the Knowl parkland). Moreover, when late in life, Le Fanu became a solitary widower, living a nocturnal and reclusive existence in his big house in Merrion Square, he was haunted by the vision of a vast and foreboding old mansion in a state of ruin, threatening to fall and crush him, a fear which can clearly be connected with the Ascendancy preoccupation concerning the fate of their estates.

While still living at Abington, Le Fanu entered Trinity College as an external classics student, and in 1839, after the required year of residence in an English Inn,

he graduated as a barrister. However, even during his period of legal training in London, his ambition was to be a writer. And at this time he started publishing stories in the *Dublin University Magazine*, a journal launched by a group of young Tories who, like Le Fanu, saw the old hegemony of their caste being threatened by a Whig reforming government.

Both as a journalist and as a member of the Irish Metropolitan Conservative Society, one of the many Tory groups formed after the suppression of the Orange Order, Le Fanu became for a while an active spokesman for the interests of the conservative Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. However, in the course of his life, Le Fanu's political attitude would be quite ambiguous: he romanticized the cause of Irish nationalism in some historical romances set in the late XVII and early XVIII centuries and though strongly anti-O'Connell, he favoured for a while the Repeal of the Union, before reasserting his conservatism and seeking, unsuccessfully, the Tory seat for Co. Carlow, in 1852. But after the loss of his beloved wife (1858), and the accession of a Whig government, he withdrew from national politics, increasingly becoming a recluse, interested in the past and in supernatural phenomena, and expressing in most of his stories an anticipation of eternal rest. This is also the case in *Uncle Silas*, where many of the characters are death-obsessed, and where even the young protagonist considers suicide at a certain moment as a release from her present anxieties. Le Fanu died in 1873, burdened with financial difficulties.

Whereas the XIX century was the Golden Age for the English novel, this was not the case with the Irish novel. As Cahalan has put it:

> Far from golden, the middle and later years of the nineteenth century were in many ways the bleakest of all for the Irish novel. [10]

A point which is also made by McCormack, according to whom:

> The apparent solidity of the novel tradition in Ireland is largely an illusion...If we leave aside the ephemera of the day, it is difficult to point to a period when more than two or three novelists of any ability were at work simultaneously. [11]

Though I am not going to dwell on the different reasons that may have conditioned this circumstance (the absence of a well-established middle class, no clearly unified national or even linguistic identity, etc.), I would like to point out that Irish writing had been strongly determined by the political and socioeconomic conditions of the country.

In spite of Yeats's declaration in 1891 in his Introduction to *Representative Irish Tales* that Irish stories "are Ireland talking to herself", it is a fact that early Irish novelists wrote mostly for English publishers and for English as well as Anglo-Irish readers. The anti-catholic legal measures which followed the defeat of Catholic King James by Protestant King William at the Battle of the Boyne (1690) had divided the

population of Ireland into a vast underclass of peasant farmers and labourers —many of whom were Catholic and Irish speakers— and an elite Anglo-Irish upper class. Not only did the oppressed socioeconomic conditions of the majority of the population of the country deprive it of a considerable number of writers and of a large public but, as a consequence of a long tradition of anti-Irish prejudice created by English writers who had favoured the stereotype of the "stage-Irishman", interest in Irish subjects and setting was limited or at least biased. [12] It is true that some early protestant Irish writers —such as Jonathan Swift, William Chaigneau or Henry Brooke— tried to counter English prejudices and stereotypes of the Irish, at the same time that protestant Irish nationalism increased —culminating in the protestant "Patriot Parliament" of Henry Grattan in 1782— the first novel that openly announced itself as Irish, and which made Irish history and politics central to its story, was Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent, an Hibernian Tale*, published in 1800, significantly the year of Ireland's political annexation by England through the Act of Union. It is said that when King George III finished reading Castle Rackrent, he rubbed his hands and exclaimed: "What what, I know something now of my Irish subjects". [13]

Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* includes footnotes about Irish rural life and dialect, and as later novelists such as Sidney Owenson, and the Banims would also do, she uses the device of creating an English visitor protagonist, a convention which served a common purpose in all those writers: to present Ireland and put it in a positive light for readers who were mostly English. Though the Banims and later writers such as Gerald Griffin and William Carleton, who were Catholic and middle class, broadened the range of the Irish novel by dealing with their own class, Ascendancy novelists such as Maturin and Le Fanu would deal with their own milieu, presenting aristocrats and peasants, as Edgeworth had done. [14] But, irrespective of their social background, both Irish and Anglo-Irish XIX century novelists were influenced by limited publishing opportunities in Ireland and limited readership in their country. Many, and Le Fanu among them, had to look for English publishers for their novels of the 60s. [15] Similarly, the survival of the strongly anti-Catholic *Dublin University Magazine* which Le Fanu bought in 1861 and which he edited until 1869, depended for its survival on the English market, and was linked ideologically to English culture. Significantly, in 1869 the writer sold the magazine to a London printer, Charles F. Adams.

The above outlined circumstances explain the English setting of *Uncle Silas*. But, as I mentioned before, and as I hope to illustrate now by close reference to the text, the Irish elements in the novel, though veiled, are many.

Actually, *Uncle Silas*, does not present a very involved story in spite of its length —over 400 pages—, for this is not so much a novel of incident as of atmosphere. Basically, it is the story, told by herself, of Maud Ruthyn, a 17-year-old nervous and sensitive girl. She lives at Knowl, an isolated old house, with her

withdrawn father and a few elderly servants, one of whom, the sinister French governess Madame de la Rougierre, terrifies and victimizes Maud, for as she says:

> I think she had a wish to reduce me to a state of the most abject bondage. She had designs of domination and subversion regarding the entire household, I now believe, worthy of the evil spirit I sometimes fancied her. [16]

Even though Madame is sacked —after having been discovered one night rifling Mr Ruthyn's desk— her menacing figure, draped in black, will haunt Maud's imagination: "She contrived to leave her glamour over me, and in my dreams she troubled me." [17] The fact that the nationality of the governess is French is probably not a random or irrelevant detail, for in the context of Irish history France had repeatedly given support to revolutionary attempts to overthrow the established order, and therefore, in the minds of the Ascendancy, France was a hidden menace, associated with vile plotting.

Foreseeing his imminent death, which he refers to as a temporary absence, "a journey", Maud's father asks her to go and live with her Uncle Silas, whom she only knows from an early portrait. Though he is now a very religious man, he has always been a forbidden subject in the family, on account of his having led a vicious and spendthrift youth and because he is suspected of having committed some dreadful crime, which has wrongly placed him and their ancient and honorouble family under a "disgraceful slur" (p.104). Maud accepts her mission to dispel this "intolerable slander" (p.104) and clear their reputation, and so, after her father's death she moves to Bartram Hall, the magnificient but now wild and dilapidated house of her uncle. She describes her first vision of the "bleached and phantasmal" place in the following terms:

> I was almost breathless as I approached. The bright moon shining full on the white front of the old house revealed not only its highly decorated style, its fluted piers and doorway, rich and florid carving, and balustraded summit, but also its stained and mossgrown front. Two giant trees, overthrown at last by the recent storm, lay with their upturned roots, and their yellow foliage still flickering on the sprays that were to bloom no more, where they had fallen...which was studded with tufted weeds and grass. All this gave to the aspect of Bartram a forlorn character of desertion and decay, contrasting almost awfully with the grandeur of its proportions and richness of its architecture. [18]

Maud's stay under Silas's roof will not be a pleasant one. She is harassed by Silas's vulgar and brutal son Dudley, by the sudden reappearance of Madame de la Rougierre, and what is worse, she is terrified by the uncle himself:

> I was always nervous in his presence: there was, I fancy, something mesmeric in the odd sort of influence which, without effort, he exercised

> over my imagination. Sometimes this grew into a dismal panic, and Uncle Silas —polished, mild— seemed unaccountably horrible to me. Then it was no longer an accidental fascination of electro-biology. It was something more. His nature was incomprehensible by me. (...) Gentle he had been to me —kindly he had nearly always spoken; but it seemed like the mild talk of one of those goblins of the desert, whom Asiatic superstition tells of, who appear in friendly shapes to stragglers from the caravan, beckon to them from afar, call them by their names, and lead them where they are found no more. Was, then, all his kindness but a phosphoric radiance covering something colder and more awful than the grave? [19]

At Bartram Hall Maud is even deprived of the company of the only agreeable person in the house, her rough but honest cousin Milly, who is sent away to France, for there is a plot afoot, instigated by Uncle Silas, to murder Maud and get hold of her properties. In the end though, she will escape her fate and the French governess will be the victim instead, whereas Silas will commit suicide by taking an over-dose of laudanum.

Now, though the story is fairly sensationalist, and it abounds in moments of emotional intensity, it is not flawed by excessive sentimentality. It avoids becoming too hysterical or melodramatic, as many Gothic stories do, thanks to Le Fanu's skilful use of the protagonist/narrator. In fact, there are two Mauds: the innocent and nervous Maud at the time of the action, and a wiser Maud who recollects and comments on the horrors her younger self had undergone. So there is a balance between the highly-strung sensibility of the young character and the gentle, discursive account of the mature narrator. Moreover, there is a very clever building up of suspense. Thus, from a relatively quiet and prosaic beginning we are led to a fast-moving dénouement, and there is also an effective combination of warm fireside scenes and dreary landscape and stormy weather, of light episodes and disturbing manifestations.

Now, as to the Irish elements in the novel, we can perceive, for example, that despite some scattered allusions to Bunyan's Christian and to Falstaff most literary references belong to the Anglo-Irish context: Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Moore, and Le Fanu's own ancestor R.B. Sheridan, who is mentioned by Silas with something of the intimacy of the family circle:

> You know in that pleasant play, poor Sheridan —delightful fellow!— all our fine spirits are dead —he makes Mrs. Malaprop say there is nothing like beginning with a little aversion. [20]

Significantly, during the months when Le Fanu was writing *Uncle Silas* he was doing research on his own family history, and he even dedicated the novel to the Countess of Gifford, a Sheridan.

On the other hand, we find a clearly metaphorical use of the setting, which though nominally situated in Derbyshire is a self-contained world with very little relation to its surroundings. Bartram Hall seems to conform to the stereotype derelict mansions of Gothic fiction, and the narrator herself compares it to one of the buildings in a book by Mrs Radcliffe:

> Long corridors and galleries stretched away in dust and silence, and were crossed by others, whose dark arches inspired me in the distance with an awful sort of sadness. It was plainly one of those great structures in which you might easily lose yourself, and with a pleasing terror it reminded me of that delightful old abbey in Mrs Radcliffe's romance. [21]

However, the geographical isolation of the two country houses of the Ruthyns, the social and political ostracism they suffer following their former influence, and the fact that they belong to a denominational minority, are symbolic of the position of the Ascendancy in general, which like the Bartram paling "although decayed, was still very strong", and of Le Fanu's own experiences. In fact, in spite of the dreadful adventures Maud undergoes at Bartram Hall, her mixed feelings when abandoning it seem to reflect Le Fanu's own reminiscences of the glebe-house at Abington:

> I looked on the receding landscape, the giant trees -the palatial, time-stained mansion. A strange conflict of feelings, sweet and bitter, rose and mingled in the reverie. [22]

Other fairly obvious allusions to Le Fanu's private life that can be detected in the novel are for example his financial difficulties throughout the decade of the sixties, resulting in the mortgage on his life-interest in Merrion Square, which are echoed in Uncle Silas's debts and threats of ejection. Also, Austin Ruthyn's moody character and his Swedenborgianism are modelled on his own. And even though the sustained and treacherous plotting of Uncle Silas can be considered a common ingredient in Gothic novels portraying an endangered heiress, it can probably also be explained in terms of the mounting fears of a Fenian rising at the time of writing the novel (a rising which finally occurred on 5 March 1867, and though it was easily suppressed, Le Fanu stood in obvious danger for his own footman took part in it. "I am only thankful, —he would later comment— his orders were not to put me to death, or burn my house before setting out, as they obey implicitly, under pain of death." [23]).

Apart from those more or less veiled thematic allusions to the Irish reality and to the author's own predicament, there is also another important aspect in *Uncle Silas* which reveals an Irish provenance in the overall conception of the story. As was mentioned before, in spite of the length of the book, relatively little happens. Things are held in a kind of stasis, a state of threatening suspension, which can be seen, as Le Fanu's biographer W.J. McCormack has pointed out, as mirroring the

threatened survival of the Ascendancy's former power and privilege. *Uncle Silas* abounds in static scenes: settings and characters are repeatedly presented in frozen gestures, and through framing devices such as windows or portraits. Thus, the first landscape that Maud introduces is one seen from her father's house, through a window, a device which is used several times througout the book. And figures are not only repeatedly described as being like a portrait —"Rembrandt-like", "à la Wouvermans", etc.—, but they often appear unexpectedly from a dark corner, and vanish in a similar way. Moreover, due to his habit of taking drugs, Silas falls into constant trances, and virtually on each occasion when he appears he is described in terms drawn from the vocabulary of death —preter-naturally tall and thin, spectral, monumental, like marble, in necromantic black...—. On the other hand, there is very little spatial movement in the story, apart from Maud's coach journey from Knowl to Bartram. Though characters such as Madame de la Rougierre and Dudley disappear from the scene, their sinister figures are always nearby, ready to reappear and prey on Maud. And even when Maud sets out on what is meant to be a trip to France, her final destination turns out to be a remote corner of Bartram, where she is jailed and almost murdered. One could almost say that characters in the book live in a kind of Purgatory. This feeling of suspension, of being in a temporary situation, waiting, so to speak, for final judgement, can again be equated with the predicament of the Ascendancy class in Ireland at the time of writing the novel.

Though Le Fanu has his novel end on a hopeful note, with Maud in possession of her hereditary mansions, happily married, and enjoying the now pleasant view from the window:

> The sweet green landscape and pastoral hills, (...) the flowers and birds and the waving boughs of glorious trees -all images of liberty and safety. [24]

this last piece of wishful thinking on the part of the author was not to be fulfilled in his own case, for after his death in 1873, his recurring nightmare of a derelict mansion threatening total desintegration may be seen as having come true: his children forfeited the property of the family house, his eldest son dying shortly afterwards, and his other son and two daughters leaving Ireland for England. Both the fate of Le Fanu's descendants and the English setting of *Uncle Silas* seem to anticipate Le Fanu's —and the Ascendancy's— severance with modern Ireland.

Though the foregoing has been a cursory reading of *Uncle Silas*, in which all those aspects of the novel which fall outside the scope of the present study have been left aside, I hope it has validated my earlier claim that the novel can be considered as a microcosm of Anglo-Irish society, as well as a mirror which reflects many of the personal experiences and fears of the XIX-century author. Le Fanu's choice of the Gothic mode proved most appropriate, for this is a type of fiction which does not only aim, in an escapist vein, at making the reader shudder by exploiting the fear of the unknown: "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind"

in H.P.Lovecraft's famous phrase, but which often embodies deep-rooted social and psychological anxieties.

Notes

[1] *Uncle Silas*, New York: Dover Publications, 1966.
[2] *The Fantasy Book*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1978, p.60.
[3] *The Strength to Dream*, London: Abacus, 1976, p.138.
[4] *The Literature of Horror*, London: Longman, 1980, pp.230-1
[5] Ibid. p.237.
[6] McCormack, W.J., *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
[7] James M. Cahalan complains about this biased critical approach in his recent book *The Irish Novel*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988.
[8] Ibid. p.72.
[9] *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 16, Oct. 1840, 390.
[10] Cahalan, op. cit., p.46.
[11] McCormack, op. cit., p.250
[12] According to the stereotype the Irishmen were invariably presented as humorous and ignorant rogues.
[13] Quoted in Butler, Marilyn, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography*, Clarendon, 1972, p.359
[14] Incidentally, Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* is also the first "Big House" novel, i.e. one that deals with the large houses on the estates of the Anglo-Irish gentry, which as emblems of the decadence of the Ascendancy, were to become a central image in the XIX century Irish novel, still prominent in the work of contemporary authors such as Jennifer Johnston.
[15] Bentley and Chapman & Hall in Le Fanu's case.
[16] *Uncle Silas*, New York: Dover Publications, 1966, p.23.
[17] Ibid. p.102.
[18] Ibid. p.185.
[19] Ibid. pp.343-4.
[20] Ibid. p. 317.
[21] Ibid. p.198-9.
[22] Ibid. p. 398.
[23] Quoted in McCormack, op. cit., p. 210.
[24] *Uncle Silas*, p.435.