



Sheridan Le Fanu
Uncle Silas

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JOSEPH THOMAS SHERIDAN LE FANU (1814–73) was born in Dublin, the elder son of a clergyman whose Huguenot forebears had married into the Sheridan family. His paternal grandmother was the sister of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. In 1826, the Revd Le Fanu was promoted dean of Emlý, and with his family went to live at Abington, County Limerick. Educated at Trinity College and the King's Inns, Dublin, Sheridan Le Fanu began a career as a journalist and writer of fiction. By 1840 he had published a dozen or so stories (including 'A Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter') in the *Dublin University Magazine*, which had been founded in 1833 by a group of young Trinity College men with strong literary interests. From 1840 onwards, he became increasingly involved in Irish journalism as editor of *The Warder* and owner or part-owner of that and other papers. In 1843 he married Susanna Bennett, the daughter of a leading Irish QC. His first two novels, *The Cock and Anchor* (1845) and *The Fortunes of Colonel Forlough O'Brien* (1847), were historical fictions in the style of Walter Scott, expressing a fond approach to the Irish past that proved impossible to sustain following the trauma of the Great Famine. Following the deaths of his wife and mother in 1858 and 1861, Sheridan Le Fanu resumed fiction-writing with an Irish historical romance, *The House by the Churchyard* (1861–3), now remembered for its influence on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939). *Wylder's Hand* and *Uncle Silas* both appeared in 1864. Though his subsequent novels are less achieved, *Uncle Silas* is celebrated as a chilling psychological exploration of fear, anxiety, and loss. Throughout his writing life, Le Fanu published accomplished short stories and tales, the best of which are collected in *Green Tea and Other Weird Stories* (Oxford World's Classics, 2020).

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SHERIDAN LE FANU

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Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

CLAIRE CONNOLLY

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INTRODUCTION

*Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot
will prefer to read the Introduction as an Afterword*

UNCLE SILAS opens in winter, indoors, on a dark and stormy night. Candles are being lit and a substantial fire blazes inside the long, dark wood-panelled room. A violent wind screams outside. It is a liminal time of the year—the second week of November, as autumn shades into winter—and a girl is poised on the edge of adulthood. That young woman, Maud Ruthyn, is the narrator of the novel and her coming peril is already palpable. Sheridan Le Fanu's novel tracks Maud through distractions, confusions, and threats as she comes to an awareness of herself, her family history, and her friendships. In the process she has to reckon with her preoccupied and irresponsible father, a wicked governess, and the strange and enigmatic figure of her uncle Silas, a character with veiled motives and mysterious intentions. All of this is filtered via a gauzy narrative—Maud's worries accumulate 'in filmy layers, one over the other' (p. 353)—and shaped by a taut, nervy relationship between security and vulnerability.

The opening scene introduces readers to Maud's distinctive voice, marked by an uneasy tone and unsettled memories. Even as we encounter the heroine's vulnerability to her surroundings, however, there are moments of startling clarity. Seeming to hover above the domestic scene, Maud suddenly breaks with the past and declares: 'I was that girl' (p. 7). The announcement is dramatic and deliberate. But unlike Magwitch's revelation of his role in Pip's life at the end of *Great Expectations*—'It's me wot has done it'—Maud's melodramatic revelation comes at the very outset of the narrative. She is both witness to and participant in her own unfolding story, subject to vicious schemes but also possessed of the 'direful knowledge of good and evil that comes with years' (p. 47).¹ As readers, we are immersed in this divided world-view and do well to pay close attention to what

¹ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 291.

Maud does and does not tell us, what she sees as well as what she fails to notice.

The shadow cast by that opening scene is a long and terrible one. What might have been a typical tale of ‘The Wicked Uncle and the Endangered Heir’ became, as Irish modernist writer Elizabeth Bowen described it, a novel that gains by the page in ‘pressure, volume and spiritual urgency’.² M. R. James concurred, claiming that *Uncle Silas* was one of the few novels able to combine recognizable characters and realist settings with an intense air of mystery and ‘the crescendo of impending doom’.³ These magnetic effects were the work of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, a writer whose skills were honed in Ireland during the turbulent decades of the mid-nineteenth century.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, novelist

When Le Fanu published *Uncle Silas* in London in December of 1864, he was already a successful novelist, journalist, and publisher. He was also a well-connected Irish Protestant whose family included the famous eighteenth-century playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Le Fanu was born on 28 August 1814 at no. 45 Lower Dominick Street, Dublin. His father, the Revd Thomas Le Fanu, was appointed chaplain to the Royal Hibernian Military School in 1815, and the family moved to the village of Chapelizod, within easy reach of the fortified environs of Dublin’s Phoenix Park. Ireland had been incorporated into a Union with Britain in 1800, a new stage in a centuries-old relationship between the two countries that began with the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169. Despite the promises of the Union, a majority of Irish Catholics remained without rights in the early years of the nineteenth century while the role of Lord Lieutenant and a heavy military presence underlined Ireland’s continuing status as colony. The Phoenix Park—home to the Viceregal Lodge as well as a parade ground, military barracks and hospital, a magazine fort, and from 1824 the office of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland—occupied a central role in the culture of colonial Ireland. Among the ‘earliest

² Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Introduction to *Uncle Silas*’, repr. in Gary William Crawford, Jim Rockhill and Brian J. Showers (eds), *Reflections in a Glass Darkly: Essays on J. Sheridan Le Fanu* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 333–45, at 333.

³ M. R. James, ‘Introduction to *Uncle Silas*’, repr. in Crawford, Rockhill and Showers (eds), *Reflections in a Glass Darkly*, 87–90, at 87.

recollections' of his brother William were 'the rejoicings, illuminations, and reviews that took place on the accession of George IV to the throne in 1820, and the excitement caused by his visit to Ireland in 1821'.⁴ The Park was also a place of leisure and retreat, filled with 'green lawns and lofty trees' with a coach road running through.⁵

But Sheridan Le Fanu's youth was not entirely spent in the sheltering embrace of Anglo-Ireland. When Le Fanu senior acquired a further living at Ardnageehy, County Cork, in 1817 as well as the rectorship of Abington, County Limerick, he continued to live in Dublin as an absentee cleric. But on becoming dean of Emly in 1826, Thomas Le Fanu came into possession of a house in Abington and moved his family there. Leaving Dublin behind, the family were plunged into the inequities of rural Ireland, injustices in which Thomas Le Fanu took his part both as absentee holder of clerical posts and as the representative of a minority church that continued to collect tithes from the majority Catholic population. Speaking about Ireland in the House of Lords in 1812, Byron remarked on the 'grievance of tithes, so severely felt by the peasantry' and noted the particular 'irritation' felt in large absentee livings where 'the only resident Protestants are the tithe proctor and his family'.⁶

In 1825, Abington's Catholic priest, Father Costello, was interviewed as part of the *Third Report of the Select Committee on the State of Ireland*. Asked by the commissioners to describe the demographic make-up of the population, Costello estimated that there were around six thousand Catholics in the locality along with a passing population of 'strolling beggars who have no fixed residence'. He counted one Protestant resident to every five hundred Catholics, implying that only some half a dozen Protestants lived in this densely populated place. Of those largely impoverished Catholics, Costello noted that they lived upon a subsistence diet of 'Potatoes, and perhaps milk or

⁴ William Le Fanu, *Seventy Years of Irish Life* (London: Edward Arnold, 1893), 2–3.

⁵ See John Gamble, *Sketches of History, Politics and Manners, Taken in Dublin and the North of Ireland, in the Autumn of 1818*, in Gamble, *Society and Manners in Early-Nineteenth Century Ireland*, ed. Breandán MacSuibhne (Dublin: Field Day Press, 2011), 484.

⁶ Lord Byron, 'Debate on the Earl of Donoughmore's Motion for a Committee on the Roman Catholic claims, April 21, 1812', in *The Parliamentary Speeches of Lord Byron* (London, 1824), 28.

herrings' while their livelihoods were subject to crop failures, typhus outbreaks, and unfair treatment:

They feel the degradation, which small as the number of persons of a different religion in the parish is, is excited by the supercilious conduct of some of those persons towards them in their transactions of life, shewing, that they feel a superiority by which the others are degraded; they are most interested also in the right of burial, in the attendance of the clergy in the churchyards at burials, of which they are deprived at present.⁷

The degradations described by Abington's Fr Costello resulted in organized forms of rural resistance, including the 'Captain Rock' campaign of 1821–4 which began near Newcastle West, County Limerick, some 50 kilometres south-west of Abington, and extended across the southern parts of Ireland. This Rockite Rebellion was succeeded by the Tithe War of 1831, which saw violent popular protests across the country. Lecturing to the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1899, on the brink of a new century, P. J. M'Donnell speculated on the likely effects on Le Fanu of living in a time and place where 'midnight attacks were frequent, when people slept with pistols at their bedsides': 'What terrible visions he must have had; what strange, wild, and mysterious pictures must have haunted his imagination. He passed through the terrible time; he was fitted to describe it.'⁸ All of Le Fanu's writing can be seen to fit with that unjust and violent Munster landscape of his youth. In Abington, stones were thrown at Le Fanu's sister Elizabeth while their brother William described how he and a cousin were ambushed by 'a considerable and very threatening crowd, who saluted us with "Down with the Orangemen! Down with the tithes!"'⁹ Their cousin Caroline Norton wrote from London around this time, sympathizing with the family's loss of comfort. But the detail of William Le Fanu's description is revealing: two young gentlemen on horses carrying pistols were assailed by locals on foot, armed with stones and spades. Surrounded by a populous and impoverished peasantry, the Le Fanus thought of themselves as the isolated and beleaguered victims of a diminishing income and a changing cultural world. A skewed relationship between social privilege and perilous conditions pervades the author's think-

⁷ *Third Report from the Select Committee on the State of Ireland* (London, 1825), 423.

⁸ *Freeman's Journal* (27 April 1899), 2.

⁹ William Le Fanu, *Seventy Years of Irish Life*, 61.

ing, often realized via the image of an isolated family or house. Literary critic W. J. McCormack traces lines of connection between this Anglo-Irish background and Le Fanu's fictions of existential doubt, suggesting that the embittered, dissolving forms of authority found in *Uncle Silas* are rooted in Le Fanu's Limerick years.¹⁰

Even when Le Fanu commenced his degree at Trinity College Dublin in 1832, he was registered as a country scholar, meaning substantial periods spent at home in Abington. Despite being admitted to the King's Inn (Dublin) in 1836, to the Lincoln's Inn (London) in 1838, and called to the Irish Bar in 1839, Le Fanu never practised the law. Instead, he earned his money in the world of books and magazines. Le Fanu had financial interests in several Irish newspapers, including *The Warder* (Dublin) and the *Statesman and Dublin Christian Record* and from 1861 to 1869 was the owner of the *Dublin University Magazine*. In 1843 he married Susanna Bennett, the daughter of George Bennett, QC, a Dublin barrister. They had two sons and two daughters. They moved into her father's grand house on Merrion Square and lived there for the rest of their lives.

As a writer, Le Fanu is particularly associated with the *Dublin University Magazine*, a journal that he owned from 1861 to 1869, to which he began contributing in 1838, and for which he wrote his first ghost story 'The Ghost and the Bone-setter'. Founded on the principles of unionist politics and unofficially allied to the Protestant interest via Trinity College, the *Dublin University Magazine* occupied a distinctive cultural space in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. Its overall tone was gloomy and pessimistic, expressive of failed Tory hopes in the face of Whig reforms. Even as it decried moves towards weakening of the Union and reform of the Church of Ireland, however, the magazine also published original Irish fiction and poetry by writers including Charles Lever and Samuel Ferguson. When Lever took on the editorship of the journal in 1842, he wanted Irish writers—'the acknowledged staff of periodical literature in England'—to 'unite' in a literary enterprise that would bring to Ireland 'the same proud position in public estimation, that Scotsmen have won for their magazine before the eyes of Great

¹⁰ W. J. McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991), 45–6.

Britain'.¹¹ The indirect reference to *Blackwood's Magazine* and to Scotland spells out the unionist nature of the undertaking but such extensive cultural ambitions meant that writers like William Carleton and James Clarence Mangan could move between the *Dublin University Magazine* and the culturally nationalist Young Ireland publication, *The Nation*. In the traumatic aftermath of the Great Famine (1845–8), though, what had been a broad coalition of conservative and national interests in the politically and culturally fluid years of the 1830s and early 1840s fell asunder. Afterwards, divisions hardened and alliances narrowed. A moment of potential cultural renewal closed down, not to reopen until the decades after Le Fanu's death with the Literary Revival spearheaded by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in the 1890s.

Among Le Fanu's earliest writing is 'Passages in the Secret History of an Irish Countess', a story that bears a close relation to the plot of *Uncle Silas*. One of a series of linked stories published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1838 and 1840, 'Passages in the Secret History of an Irish Countess' was again revised as 'The Murdered Cousin' in 1851 and later published in a book of stories given the title *The Purcell Papers*. Using a device he perfected in *In A Glass Darkly*, Le Fanu connected these fictions via the figure of 'a parish priest in the south of Ireland' who is a 'curious and industrious collector of old local traditions' and a compiler of stories.¹² Although it contains the outline of *Uncle Silas's* plot—a brother suspected of murder, a curious will, a niece in peril, an evil Frenchwoman—'Passages in the Secret History of an Irish Countess' has a recognizably Irish topography with the brothers' houses located in Cork and Galway.

Passages through history: the publication of Uncle Silas

Uncle Silas was written and published in the aftermath of a terrible loss. Le Fanu's wife Susanna died in 1858, having passed through a traumatic loss of religious faith that in turn shook her husband. Most biographies report that Susanna's death prompted Le Fanu to

¹¹ *Dublin University Magazine* 19/112 (Apr. 1842), 424; quoted in Elizabeth Tilley, 'Periodicals', in *Oxford History of the Irish Book*, iv. *The Irish Book in English, 1800–1891*, ed. James H. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151–69, at 155.

¹² Sheridan Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* (New York: Garland, 1979), i. 1–3.

retreat to a cloistered and reclusive life, notoriously becoming the ‘Invisible Prince’ of Merrion Square, Dublin. Yet throughout those years and up to his death in 1873, Le Fanu continued to write, publish, and socialize while his fictions remained vividly alive to the rhythms of social, cultural, and political change. In 1867, reflecting on the threat of a Fenian uprising, Le Fanu could remark on the ‘fiddlings, dancings and flirtations’ of Dublin life while critic Nicholas Daly has found regular references to family social outings in the Dublin newspapers of the day.¹³ Le Fanu also kept up with his brother William who was a successful railway engineer in Victorian Dublin. The wide range of contemporary cultural references found in *Uncle Silas* take in the 1859 revised edition of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* along with many knowing references to contemporary print culture.

Not only was Le Fanu widowed in the 1850s but the entire face of the country changed around him. The Great Famine, caused by crop-failure but exacerbated by policies of the Government in London, was a political, social, humanitarian, and ecological disaster on an unprecedented scale, which resulted in the death of approximately one million (mainly Irish-speaking) inhabitants of Ireland. Dublin did not escape its devastating effects and many died or emigrated. For the Anglo-Irish, the political aftermath of famine saw the beginning of the break-up of their power, as bankrupt owners were forced to sell insolvent estates via the Encumbered Estates Act of 1849. Those changes had a direct impact on the writing of *Uncle Silas*. Where Le Fanu had previously penned historical novels that tried ‘to gratify the new sentiment which the *Nation* had awakened’ (as described by the politician and journalist Charles Gavan Duffy),¹⁴ now he turned away from Irish topics. Prompted by his English publisher, Richard Bentley, Le Fanu began to write contemporary fiction with recognizable English settings. As a result, *Uncle Silas* offers a strange mix of Irish concerns—not least the recurrent question of a past that will not go away—with English topography. The novel’s absorption in

¹³ Nicholas Daly, *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 84.

¹⁴ Quoted in Melissa Fegan, ‘Young Ireland and Beyond’ in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *Irish Literature in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 43.

a world of symbols adds a further layer to the overall atmosphere of chilling ambiguity.

Uncle Silas was published monthly from July to December 1864 in the *Dublin University Magazine*. Le Fanu seems to have already tried to interest the *Cornhill Magazine* in the story between May and July of that year and the trials and pressures of serial publication were a constant worry. Writing to his London publisher Richard Bentley, Le Fanu explained in detail how hard he worked to keep up with the pace of magazine publication, explaining that ‘All then, except about 32 Magazine pages was written in 3 months only 2 thirds of which i.e. 2 months were applicable to the writing the tale. I am very tired, & claim some credit for diligence.’¹⁵

Exhausted as he was, Le Fanu entered into negotiations with Bentley in 1863, seeking an arrangement for a novel that would follow on from *The House by the Churchyard*, five hundred copies of which were published in London in 1863. Because of that novel’s poor sales, Bentley stipulated ‘the story of an English subject in modern times’ for Le Fanu’s next book.¹⁶ The idea that the topic of Ireland had exhausted its audience was already suggested in 1848, at the height of the Famine, when the publisher Henry Colburn wrote to Anthony Trollope to advise him that ‘readers do not like novels on Irish subjects as well as on others’.¹⁷ And in 1853, the writer and journalist Harriet Martineau observed that ‘The world is weary of the subject of Ireland; and, above all the rest, the English reading world is weary of it. The mere name brings up images of men in long coats and women in long cloaks; of mud cabins and potatoes; the conacre, the middlemen and the priest; the faction fight, and the funeral howl.’ Martineau did not doubt the suffering experienced during the Famine but remarked that ‘The sadness of the subject has in late years increased the weariness.’ Irish difficulties, she said, were ‘too real and practical to be an intellectual exercise or a pastime—to serve as knowledge or excitement. Something ought to be

¹⁵ Le Fanu to Richard Bentley (11 October 1864); quoted in McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland*, 205.

¹⁶ Richard Bentley to Le Fanu (26 February 1863); quoted in McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu in Victorian Ireland*, 140.

¹⁷ Henry Colburn to Anthony Trollope (11 November 1848); in Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography and other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54.

done for Ireland; and, to readers by the fireside, it is too bewildering to say what.¹⁸

Uncle Silas, *the novel*

By Christmas of 1864, *Uncle Silas* was in the hands of Le Fanu's fireside readers. Between its covers, they found no references to Irish life or history but rather a shocking tale of death and betrayal, set in contemporary England. On the sudden death of her father, Austin Ruthyn, from a heart attack, Maud is left to the care of her uncle Silas in Derbyshire, until she comes of age. Silas is suspected of having murdered (in his house) a man to whom he owed gambling debts, but he has never been brought to justice. Sinister in appearance and a consummate villain, Silas plots to marry Maud to his oafish son Dudley (who is, it emerges, already married). When this scheme fails, father and son conspire to murder the ward and so inherit her fortune. A French governess, Madame de la Rougierre, is brought in to help with the plan, in which the victim is to be killed with a spiked hammer. Amidst scenes of distress and attempted flight, the violent plot fails. The French governess is murdered in Maud's place, a sight witnessed by a petrified Maud, who looks on as Dudley drives 'a hammer, one end of which had been beaten out into a longish tapering spike' (p. 420) into the body of the shrieking woman. Though hardly rivalling the novel's lurid depiction of this 'diabolical surgery' (p. 420), Silas's own fate is also filled with menace: he takes an overdose of laudanum, leaving others to bear the brunt of the criminal plan he has masterminded. Maud ends the novel as the contented Lady Ilbury, the wife of a 'noble-hearted husband' (p. 429) but also as someone who has endured the loss of a child. It is at this later, shadowed, point in her life that she tells her story.

Uncle Silas is structured via a series of secret motives that unfold via a highly dramatic narrative that features money, violence, imprisonment, romance, and escape. The narrative hunt for clues, along with Maud's curiosity, leads literary historian Allan Hepburn to list the novel (with *Treasure Island* and *Kim*) as one among the 'Victorian precursors

¹⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Westminster Review* 3 (1853); Deborah Ann Logan (ed.), *Harriet Martineau and the Irish Question* (Lanham, MD: Lehigh University Press, 2012), 200.

to the detective and spy novel'.¹⁹ The account of the death of Tom Charke (a tale first heard by Maud in Knowl, then again from her aunt Monica, and finally a story that exerts a shaping force on her own destiny) turns on an inquest, clues, and signs. Where the detective novel is driven by a 'will to know', however, motivations in *Uncle Silas* remain shrouded within a mysterious plot that discovers itself only gradually as well as a series of cliffhanger endings, a mode familiar from sensation novels such as Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

In all of this, the traditional focus on inheritance in Gothic novels proves a powerful driving force. Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) had already explored the peculiar and unsettling threats posed by a vicious uncle. Maud, who has 'a mind very uninstructed as to the limits of the marvellous' (p. 10), is the conduit through whom the reader experiences an expansion of the boundaries of reality via such devices as her strange dreams along with the doubled relationship between the two houses of Knowl and Bartram-Haugh. The novel also makes use of Gothic themes and tropes that treat property ownership as a matter of stable patterns across the generations, even as they reduce those relationships to frayed, barely discernible connections.

Le Fanu had read widely on the supernatural and the novel references popular fiction, European folklore, and the demonology of Walter Scott as well as Irish oral tradition and Swedenborgian theology. He may also have owed a debt to a slightly earlier Catholic tradition of Irish Gothic, in particular the tales of Gerald Griffin (1803–40). Griffin had grown up on the Shannon Estuary, only a short distance from Le Fanu's childhood home in Limerick. Both writers knew not only the divided politics of the south-west of Ireland but also its supernatural stories. Among Griffin's tales can be found 'The Aylmers of Ballyaylmer', from which Le Fanu may have taken the middle name of his heroine, Maud Aylmer Ruthyn. Le Fanu's eerie tale, 'Schalken the Painter', shares with Griffin's tale 'The Brown Man' a plot, probably drawn from folklore, in which a wealthy man carries off a beautiful and vulnerable woman as his bride.

¹⁹ Allan Hepburn, 'Thrillers', in Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (eds), *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 693.

Much as the stories gathered by Griffin in his *Holland-Tide* and *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827) are explicitly framed according to a Celtic calendar, the action of *Uncle Silas* follows a traditional time frame albeit in a more discreet manner. In Griffin's *Holland-Tide* (another term for Halloween), early November is a time to retire indoors and tell stories. *Uncle Silas* opens under the shades of Samhain, signalling not only the beginning of winter in early November but also a time in pre-Christian Ireland when the line between one world and another is at its most permeable. With the plot of *Uncle Silas* concluding just as January draws to a close, the novel tracks the transition from winter to spring. Having arrived in London by train and weighed down by 'black Care' (p. 395), Maud glimpses a letter from her uncle to Madame de la Rougierre dated 30 January. The two women are to go to *Dover*, the underlined place name in the letter serving as a secret signal to the governess to return Maud to Bartram-Haugh in darkness and disguise. Passing through 'the glare of lamps' (p. 395) and a sequence of changing urban scenes, they arrive at their destination in the early hours of 31 January. As morning dawns, Maud realizes that she is not above the courtyard of a Dover hotel but rather a room overlooking the inner court of her uncle's home, to which she has been secretly returned. By late afternoon that same day, Maud knows her danger and that night she hears sounds of her grave being dug outside. Her daring rescue by Tom Brice on that same fateful night means that the novel's action closes on 1 February: in Ireland, St Brigid's Day—a Celtic fertility festival (Imbolc) to which a thin veneer of Christianity had been applied—the start of spring and the day on which the earth begins its turn towards the light.

With a narrative shaped by these threshold dates in the Celtic year—Samhain and Imbolc—the novel also recognizes the significance of Christmas, a festival made newly fashionable by the Victorians. Lady Knollys invites Maud and Milly to visit her in December when she is to spend Christmas at her home, and promises to include a gift for the loyal servant Mary Quince when she sends 'a little Christmas box' (p. 59) to Maud. Maud meanwhile is 'an admiring reader of the *Albums*, the *Souvenirs*, the *Keepsakes*, and all that flood of Christmas present lore which yearly irrigated England' (p. 67). With this reference to the Victorian seasonal fad for stories set around Christmas, Le Fanu recognizes that, as Nicholas

Daly puts it, such fashionable stories ‘had a seasonal rival in the Celtic periphery: Halloween’.²⁰ (That intimate relationship between old and new festivals may have spurred James Joyce to trace out the overlapping territories of Christmas and Halloween in his two ghostly short stories, ‘The Dead’ and ‘Clay’.²¹)

Over these already varied supernatural influences, Le Fanu layered his interests in the life and writings of the eighteenth-century mystic Swedenborg, a visionary thinker who influenced writers from William Blake and Charles Baudelaire to William Butler Yeats and A. S. Byatt. Swedenborg lived in London from the early 1770s (having moved from his native Sweden) and his writings were available in English from the middle of the eighteenth century. His theories opened up parallels and correspondences between an earthly world and a spiritual one while the man himself was reputed to converse with angels and spirits. Le Fanu was drawn to the idea of a spiritual sphere that made itself manifest in material forms, recognizable via shapes familiar from known domestic or natural worlds: ‘a world of scenery where there was a scenery like that of earth’, as W. B. Yeats put it.²² When Maud visits her mother’s grave in the company of her father’s Swedenborgian friend Dr Bryerly, he explains the need to look ‘beyond’, ‘over’, and ‘through’ the graveyard walls in order to see her mother moving ‘along an airy path’ amidst ‘a beautiful landscape, radiant with a wondrous light . . . peopled with human beings translated into the same image, beauty, and splendour’ (p. 20). In Swedenborg’s account of death, the being that passes over from mortal life retains ‘an exact resemblance of themselves in face and tone of voice’.²³ Maud finds a way to reconcile this heterodox vision of life after death with her own Christianity even as the novel’s use of Swedenborg extends far beyond its plot. Le Fanu took from Swedenborg a powerful symbolic language that operated via correspondences along which spiritual and natural world flowed into one another. The stories gathered in *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) find ways of opening up strange and uncanny passages between states of consciousness but already in *Uncle Silas*

²⁰ Daly, *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City*, 82.

²¹ See Daly, *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City*, 82.

²² W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 72.

²³ Peter Ackroyd, *Introducing Swedenborg* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 2021), 39.

there is a close attention to symbolic patterns and equivalences, helping to shape what W. J. McCormack calls the novel's 'formal economy'.²⁴

But Swedenborgianism also offered a mode of expressing extreme, barely admissible feelings, a language in which Maud becomes fluent: by the novel's conclusion she has achieved an almost writerly understanding of the world as 'the habitation of symbols—the phantoms of spiritual things immortal shown in material shape' (p. 429). Such knowledge is achieved at the cost of a searching exploration of the nature of evil and *Uncle Silas* continues an inquiry into demonical power already found in Le Fanu's earlier fiction. Reviewing *The House by the Churchyard* in 1863, the *Dublin Evening Mail* asked of its main character, Charles Archer: 'Can a man approach so nearly to the devilish? History shows that it is possible. The records of imperial wickedness furnish ample evidence that some men want only power to develop into the Satanic.'²⁵ Silas Ruthyn certainly belongs to those same ranks of the wicked. His sister, Maud's Aunt Monica, expresses it best when she wonders if 'other souls than human are sometimes born into the world, and clothed in flesh' (p. 162). Maud herself experiences a dawning understanding of his nature when she identifies a 'semi-transparent structure' through which she could 'now and then discern the light or the glare of his inner life' (p. 341). The nature of that 'inner life' remains a question for Maud for most of the novel: 'Was, then, all his kindness but a phosphoric radiance covering something colder and more awful than the grave?' (p. 342). Le Fanu's skill is to pose these terrible questions while cultivating an atmosphere of 'shadowy dread' that was, according to one contemporary review, more effective than 'fifty mortal murders'.²⁶

Steeped in the experience of death and loss, the novel affords 'a peep into Pandemonium' (p. 93). Following her mother's death and her walk with the Swedenborgian Dr Bryerly to the graveyard, Maud experiences a revelation as to the location of the afterlife, shrouded in a 'strange glamour' and belonging to 'the dazzling land of ghosts' (p. 21). Even as this supernatural apprehension dawns on Maud, however, another more terrible sight materializes in the plain

²⁴ McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland*, 6.

²⁵ *Dublin Evening Mail* (2 February 1863).

²⁶ Review of *Uncle Silas*, *The Athenaeum* (7 January 1865), 16–17.

light of day: 'On a sudden, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure—a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, courtesying [*sic*] extraordinarily low, and rather fantastically' (p. 22). The very abruptness of the arrival of the wicked French governess, Madame de la Rougierre, shifts the grounds of Le Fanu's narrative into the domain of sensation fiction. This is a move on to gory cultural ground made familiar in the 1860s by the dominance of sensational journalism, books, and plays. The first readers of *Uncle Silas* encountered the novel as part of a new leisure culture, within which the drama of everyday life proved richly entertaining material for audiences increasingly familiar with exciting and eventful popular prints, filled with shocking tales.

While sensation might be seen both as 'updated Gothic' or 'an aberrant strain' within domestic fiction, what was new was the focus on 'suspense, shock and the production of physical response in the reader or viewer'.²⁷ Brought up in an atmosphere of silence and 'awe', Maud might be seen to represent a wider cultural tendency to fall under the influence of sudden apparitions and strange sensations. Prepared for life only by 'the three-volumed gospel of the circulating library' (p. 47), Maud's narrative proves a powerful conduit for readerly immersion in a world of fearful thrills. Her susceptibility to visual spectacles is particularly noticeable in the narrative while wider cultural patterns of absorption and distraction are mirrored within Le Fanu's narrative.

With suspenseful plotting second only to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) in its capacity to terrify readers, *Uncle Silas* has been hailed as a masterpiece of the sensation genre. Its effects rely upon the power of the insecure and uncertain voice on readers and Le Fanu's ability to prolong states of narrative uncertainty. Given to flights of fancy concerning all those that surround her, Maud seems to almost delight in imagining her own victimhood: 'I could no more stir than the bird who, cowering under its ivy, sees the white owl sailing back and forward on its predatory cruise' (p. 98). While Maud compares herself to 'the conscientious heroine of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe' (p. 356), however, the novel does not simply follow in Radcliffe's footsteps by explaining and then demystifying the dangers surrounding

²⁷ Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27–8.

the imperilled heroine. Rather, *Le Fanu* plays out an imagined drama of victimhood that comes horribly true.

Whereas sensation fiction tended to play upon fears generated by unravelling social conventions and shifting gender roles, in contrast *Le Fanu* retains a traditional inheritance plot, albeit one made strange by criminal intent. The plot traces Maud's moves between family homes, affording her only a brief glimpse of urban life in London. Her fate is ultimately brought to a happy conclusion which sees her finding refuge in the home of her aunt Monica at Elverston. It is at this 'pretty gabled house, beautified with that indescribable air of shelter and comfort which belongs to an old English residence' (p. 263) that she meets her husband Lord Ilbury, and the novel's conclusion finds her firmly fixed in the marital home. The narrative representation of domesticity is, however, considerably disturbed by the novel's absorption in mental states. Throughout *Uncle Silas*, domestic interiors framed by wild outdoor spaces lend shape and substance to an experience of interiority under threat. Literary critic Patricia Coughlan remarks that *Le Fanu's* chairs, tables, and portraits realize both the details of middle-class decor and the minutiae of psychic realms of 'the conscience, the mind, the consciousness'.²⁸ The domestic interior recalled by Maud at the novel's outset represents not only a room within a house but also a fragile state of mind that seeks shelter.

As Maud wanders through her father's parklands, coming up against the fences that surround her uncle's estate and encountering locked doors, she faces threats that are emotional, physical, financial, and sexual. These include a marauding Gypsy group, her evil governess, her leering cousin Dudley, and the menacing Dickon (also known as Pegtop) Hawkes. Worst of all though are the dangers posed by her own father and uncle. A sequence of terrible betrayals by the older generation leads Vera Kreilkamp to describe *Uncle Silas* as 'an unmerciful depiction of how a beleaguered society savagely destroys its own young, the likes of which were not seen again until Molly Keane's great novel of the Irish Big House, *Good Behaviour*'.²⁹ The novel's irresponsible fathers include Austin, Silas, and Dickon Hawkes.

²⁸ Patricia Coughlan, 'Doubles, Shadows, Sedan-Chairs, and the Past: The "Ghost Stories" of J. S. Le Fanu', repr. in Crawford, Rockhill and Showers (eds), *Reflections in a Glass Darkly*, 137–60, at 146.

²⁹ Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 111.

Silas's own daughter Milly is represented as a young woman condemned to drift between class identities due to her lack of education and neglectful father. Hawkes, who lives on the estate, beats his daughter Meg and breaks her arm before conspiring in Silas's plan to murder Maud. Although not as vicious as Silas's evil schemes or as brutal as Hawkes's thuggish behaviour, Austin is explicit about his plan to put Maud in danger as part of a trial by which his reputation will be saved. 'I think little Maud would like to contribute to the restitution of her family name', says Austin, making of his daughter an 'honourable sacrifice' that will 'dispel the disgrace under which our most ancient and honourable name must otherwise continue to languish' (p. 107). Austin's intentions are made yet clearer by Dr Bryerly who explains to Maud that she has been made the ward of her uncle so as to 'purge' (p. 166) him of scandal. Maud's dream of her dead father's 'cadaverous' face with its 'unnatural expression of diabolical fury' (p. 173) seems to recognize the terrible damage done by the strange experiment in family history dreamed up by the absent Austin.

These three daughters—Maud, Milly, and Meg—are separated by class and education but come together in order to save Maud's life. Their steely nerves and clear thinking at the novel's denouement stands in contrast to their shared experience of threats and slights, lending narrative authority to women's damaged bodies and nervous feelings. But Maud's ability to recall the perils of her earlier life from her later position as a happy wife and mother relies on the conventions of the domestic novel which serve to surround and soften the chilling effects conjured up by the first-person narrative. These tensions are given a dramatic treatment in the novel's closing scenes which imagine Maud's mortal danger while according her a new power of 'terrible composure' (p. 420). Realizing her danger, she writes a letter to her aunt Monica and manages to hide it in her clothes, glad that her servant has equipped her dress with 'those capacious pockets which belonged to a former generation' (p. 372). The pocket symbolizes security as well as secrecy and confirms Maud's sense of the privileges of her class. Even in her hour of danger, her taste and wealth afford a 'Coolness' (p. 422) that screens her against harm. When she discovers that the iron bars that blocked her windows exist 'in reality' (p. 407) and not just in terrified fantasy, Maud turns resolute. Trapped in the locked chamber, she stands up 'swiftly' in order to evade her uncle: 'I often thought if I had happened to wear

silk instead of the cachmere I had on that night, its rustle would have betrayed me' (p. 422).

The innermost thread

An exchange of letters between Le Fanu and Charles Dickens hints at some of the ways in which questions of class, race, and nationality are threaded through the narrative of *Uncle Silas*. Charles Dickens wrote to Le Fanu in 1870 about a story intended for his periodical, *All the Year Round*. The story in question, Dickens thought, might benefit from an Irish character, a youth who blames everything on 'his country's real or supposed wrongs' woven 'into the innermost thread of the narrative'.³⁰ Although Le Fanu did not follow up this hint for *The Rose and the Key*, Dickens's phrasing opens up an understanding of the crossed cultural meanings woven into the 'innermost thread' of *Uncle Silas*. In relation to Ireland, the novel's interest in possession, inheritance, and dispossession draws deeply on Irish Protestant culture, using a language and set of images that goes back to Edmund Burke and forward to W. B. Yeats. In May 1856, Friedrich Engels wrote to Karl Marx that the estates of post-Famine Ireland were 'enormous, amazingly beautiful parks, but all around is waste land, and where the money comes from is impossible to see'.³¹ Irish landed estates presented an intractable political pathology in the present: a form of property that originated in colonialism and confiscation and was rapidly running into ruin and decline.

Partaking of what historian R. F. Foster calls 'Protestant insecurity and self-interrogation' and part of a broader tendency towards displaced and allegorical kinds of writing about Ireland, often with a supernatural dimension, *Uncle Silas* can be seen to address itself to post-Famine Ireland.³² The case was best made by Elizabeth Bowen in her 1946 introduction to the novel for the Cresset Press. Where Irish critic Stephen Gwynne regretted in 1919 that Le Fanu had left

³⁰ Charles Dickens to J. S. Le Fanu (26 May 1870), in *The British Academy/The Pilgrim Edition of The Letters of Charles Dickens*, xii. 1868–1870, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³¹ Engels to Marx (23 May 1853), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 85.

³² R. F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and His Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.

'no memorable presentment of Irish life', caring too much in *Uncle Silas* about 'sensational incident and ingenious construction',³³ Bowen had no hesitancy in describing *Uncle Silas* as 'an Irish story transposed to an English setting'. She found her evidence in Le Fanu's background: 'The hermetic solitude and the autocracy of the great country house, the demonic power of the family myth, fatalism, feudalism and the "ascendency" outlook', all 'accepted facts of life for the race of hybrids from which Le Fanu sprang'. 'For the psychological background of *Uncle Silas*,' she wrote, 'it was necessary for him to invent nothing.'³⁴ In *Uncle Silas*, that 'psychological background' manifests itself in the doubt and uncertainty that pervade even the most seemingly secure houses, families, and alliances. Maud inhabits 'a sinister vacancy from which authority has withdrawn', as if to mirror the Anglo-Irish sense of authority as remote and insecure.³⁵

For this, Le Fanu draws on a Big House tradition of Irish fiction that began with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and was regularly revisited in the Victorian period by novelists including Anthony Trollope and Somerville and Ross. Austin's Swedenborgian views make Knowl into a mirror image of the Irish Big House with its isolated inhabitants clinging to a minority religion. Building on this understanding of the Anglo-Irish tradition 'as both sacred and fragile', Marjorie Howes makes a convincing case for the novel's Anglo-Irish resonances, arguing that along with 'genealogical decay' and 'sexual corruption', *Uncle Silas* evinces 'a preoccupation with the nature and construction of femininity indicate the text's specifically Anglo-Irish origins and concern'. Accordingly, Howes reads the novel as 'a different version of the imperial romance of reconciliation' with Maud a heroine in a line descended from Glorvina from *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), a character whose personality is inextricably bound up with national identity.³⁶

A more materially grounded understanding of the lines of connection between *Uncle Silas* and the politics of Le Fanu's day can be

³³ Stephen Gwynne, 'Novels of Irish Life in the Nineteenth Century' (1897), repr. in *Irish Books and Irish People* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1919), 21.

³⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction to *Uncle Silas*', 334.

³⁵ McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland*, 207.

³⁶ Marjorie Howes, 'Misalliance and Anglo-Irish Tradition in Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47/2 (1992), 173.

found in a subplot concerning the cutting of the trees on Maud's estate. Via Dr Bryerly and her aunt Monica, Maud learns that her guardian uncle has been 'cutting down and selling the timber, and the oak-bark, and burning the willows, and other trees that are turned into charcoal' (p. 269). The environmental consequences as well as legal wrong inflicted by such acts of extraction are spelled out: 'It is all *waste*, and Dr Bryerly is about to put a stop to it' (p. 269). Le Fanu here draws on a resonant arboreal language of absenteeism that stretches back to eighteenth-century Irish-language poetry. In Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812), the Anglo-Irish Lord Colambre spells out the link between moral authority and environmental responsibility when he informs his mother of the costs of her London lifestyle: 'For a single season . . . at the expense of a great part of your timber, the growth of a century—swallowed in the entertainments of one winter in London! Our hills to be bare for another half century to come!'³⁷

The Derbyshire setting adopted in *Uncle Silas* enabled Le Fanu to examine the fate of great houses, where ownership was under threat and lineage a frail thread. Bowen suggested that Derbyshire itself exists at a distance from London that is both temporal and spatial: 'Up there, in the vast estates of the landed old stock, there appeared in the years when Le Fanu wrote (and still more in the years of which he wrote: the 1840s), a time lag—just such a time lag as, in a more marked form, separates Ireland from England more effectually than any sea.'³⁸ The novel's geographical framework, though, extends far beyond its Derbyshire location, taking in London and 'the Lunnon-road' (p. 190) as well as the English ports of Dover and Liverpool, France and Australia. Madame de la Rougierre, who taunts Maud with 'her ugly minstrelsy' (p. 38), is the object of hatred and suspicion among the other servants who wonder about her origins: 'Where does she come from?—is she a French or a Swiss one, or is she a Canada woman?' (p. 35). Just as Maud and her servant Mary Quince begin to approach her uncle's residence at Bartram-Haugh, they encounter a group of Gypsies who are represented as romantic outcasts from normal society: 'thievish and uncanny' in the eyes of others but 'children of mystery and liberty' (pp. 185–6) in Maud's memory.

³⁷ Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 200.

³⁸ Bowen, 'Introduction to *Uncle Silas*', 334.

The presence of robbers, poachers, and Gypsies in the novel and Silas's uneasy alliance with working-class characters including Dickon Hawkes not only evokes but also accommodates the internally divided British nation of the 1860s.

Silas's own children, Milly and Dudley, are deprived of formal education while their accents and associates place them outside the social sphere of their birth. Though Silas's plan to marry Maud off to Dudley would be one that aligned her with a gentleman by birth, it is nonetheless presented in the novel in terms of the frightening prospects of cross-class union. While Milly can be saved via her marriage to a 'good little curate' (p. 278) whom she meets at Monica's house, the character of Dudley is condemned, not least by his geographical mobility within the plot. Monica reports a rumour that he has 'gone a-soldiering to India' (p. 268) even as she wishes him in Van Diemen's Land or Tasmania. He later pretends to go to Australia via Liverpool (and contemplates actually going there should Maud pay him to save her life). The novel's ending sees Meg writing to Maud from 'her Australian farm' (p. 427), to where she has travelled with capital supplied by her wealthy friend in the company of Tom Brice, her lover and Maud's saviour, and from where she reports a sighting of Dudley. The circulation of Maud's money helps smooth out these final settlements: via her own marriage, 'the capital' (p. 426) she supplies to Meg and Tom Brice to fund their emigration to Australia, and the living that she plans to endow upon Milly's husband, the Revd Sprigge Biddlepen. Her father's friend Dr Bryerly, his worth proven, enters her employ in order 'to undertake the management of the Derbyshire estates' (p. 426).

Australia also provides what Josephine McDonagh describes as 'an efficient and plausible resolution to a plot that could not end satisfactorily in England'.³⁹ As with Elizabeth Gaskell's decision to remove Mary and Jem to the settler colony in Canada at the conclusion of *Mary Barton* (1848), Le Fanu finds a way to acknowledge the worth of lower-class lives via a subplot of relocation within the Empire. In *Uncle Silas*, though, there are hints at a fuller reckoning with migration within the narrative: Meg Hawkes, Tom Brice, and Dudley Ruthyn are all swept up in the 'vast global redistribution of

³⁹ Josephine McDonagh, *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People, 1815–1876* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4.

population' that characterized colonialism in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ As the family at home in Bartram-Haugh trace the supposed passage of Dudley's ship, the *Seamem*, in the newspaper, the novel also testifies to the role of print in shaping a quintessential nineteenth-century experience of mobility.

Unkel Silanse

According to a centenary lecture delivered in Dublin in 1943, the stories of Sheridan Le Fanu 'were the kind to float at the back of the mind'.⁴¹ With a reputation for having influenced both Charlotte Brontë and James Joyce, Le Fanu's writing can indeed be seen to drift across the centuries and span the range of Gothic modernity. Charlotte Brontë read his 'Chapter in a History of a Tyrone Family' (in which an estranged and incarcerated wife lives on the upper floors of a Gothic mansion) in the October 1839 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*.⁴² A later novel by Le Fanu, *The Wyvern Mystery* (1869), also features bigamy alongside the so-called 'spouse-in-the-house plot' made familiar by *Jane Eyre*.⁴³ Meanwhile references to Le Fanu's Dublin novel, *The House by the Churchyard*, resonate throughout *Finnegans Wake*: Joyce's description of the graveyard of a 'creep-ered' Church of Ireland building—the ghastrcold tombshape of the quick foregone on the loftleaved elm Lefanunian aboveman-sioned—gathers around itself the Gothic resonances of Le Fanu's name. Elsewhere in the *Wake*, a reference to 'Unkel Silanse' expresses an essential secrecy that both forms and deforms the novel's narrative drive towards sensational revelations.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See McDonagh, *Literature in a Time of Migration*, 5.

⁴¹ Patrick F. Byrne, 'Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu: A Centenary Memoir', *Dublin Historical Record* 26/3 (June 1973), 80–92, at 87. The lecture was first given in 1943.

⁴² See Edna Kenton, 'A Forgotten Creator of Ghosts: Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu; Possible Inspirer of the Brontës', repr. in Crawford, Rockhill and Showers (eds), *Reflections in a Glass Darkly*, 95–104; and Maia McAleavey, *The Bigamy Plot: Sensation and Convention in the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 50.

⁴³ McAleavey, *The Bigamy Plot*, 193.

⁴⁴ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 264.29–265.06, 228.17. See Katie Mishler, "'A phantom city, phaked of philim pholk": Spectral Topographies and Re-awakenings in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *The House by the Churchyard*', *Joyce Studies Annual* (2018), 161–94, at 163.

What one Victorian reviewer described as the ‘vague and gorgeous’ language of *Uncle Silas* derives much of its power from moments of hesitation and indecision whose power has not faded.⁴⁵ Le Fanu’s fine-grained silences and sublimations, thought Elizabeth Bowen, made *Uncle Silas* the first great psychological novel. To grasp that compliment more fully, it is worth thinking about the ways in which nineteenth-century psychology up to Freud thought of the mind as itself a ‘supernatural space’.⁴⁶ Seeking out intimate experiences via a kind of buried supernaturalism, *Uncle Silas* expresses fears at once physical and phantasmagoric. The dilemmas encountered by the main characters in the novel address themselves to the cultural predicaments of the 1860s—to be isolated in a crowd, a woman in a world made by men, Irish amidst the British Empire—but they also express a cultural pathology with continuing resonances, including the feeling of being haunted by dim apprehensions of danger. Throughout the novel, Maud imagines her predicament in terms of a creeping chill: she finds herself ‘freezing with horror’ (p. 27) or ‘freezing with fear’ (p. 98), and later experiences ‘a strange freezing sensation creeping from my heels to my head and down again’ (p. 369). Maud’s experience of psychic alienation is so vividly physical that even when she doubts her own sanity (‘Am I—am I mad?’ . . . ‘Is this all a dream, or is it real?’ p. 417) she quickens her steps and walks into danger as a criminal might approach the hangman’s drop. Yet Le Fanu also reserves for his heroine a remarkable ability to transfer her experiences of isolated terror onto the world at large: looking out the window from the room in which she is imprisoned, little knowing that her own grave lies beneath, Maud sees, ‘spread on the dark azure of the night this glorious blazonry of the unfathomable Creator’ (p. 416). Exterior effects of light and dark seem to express an intense sympathy with her plight while the sky unrolls as a ‘dreadful scroll—inexorable eyes. The cloud of cruel witnesses looking down in freezing brightness on my prayers and agonies’ (p. 416). Cold and harsh, those ‘cruel witnesses’ deny Maud religious consolation and remind us that even escape from immediate danger will not release

⁴⁵ Review of *Uncle Silas*, *Saturday Review* (25 November 1865); quoted in James Murphy, *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96.

⁴⁶ Terry Castle, ‘Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie’, *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1998), 26–61, at 59.

her from the 'nightmare of the real'.⁴⁷ As readers, we continue to turn to *Uncle Silas* for such moments of startling symbolization, most often associated with the experience of silent terror, when we experience a sudden pause in Le Fanu's pacy plot and receive a strange and beguiling invitation to walk the dark and lonely paths along which our inner lives are made.

⁴⁷ Victor Sage, *Le Fanu's Gothic: The Rhetoric of Darkness* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2004), 118.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

UNCLE SILAS was serialized in the *Dublin University Magazine* for six months, beginning in July 1864 and concluding in December of that year. The first instalment bore the title *Maud Ruthyn* while subsequent episodes were titled *Maud Ruthyn and Uncle Silas: A Story of Bartram-Haugh*. An earlier version of the same plot was published as 'Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess' in the *Dublin University Magazine* (November 1838); later reprinted as 'The Murdered Cousin' in Le Fanu's *Ghosts Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851). There are also a number of similarities between the plot of the novel and Le Fanu's earlier novel, *The Cock and the Anchor* (1845), a historical romance set in early eighteenth-century Dublin.

The text of this present edition is that of the first edition, published in three volumes by Richard Bentley in London to coincide with the final instalment of the novel and titled *Uncle Silas*. Bentley's edition of the novel opened with a 'Preliminary Word' which had originally appeared as the conclusion to the *Dublin University Magazine* serialization. The text was updated by W. J. McCormack for the 1981 World's Classic edition, reprinted in 1988: printing errors were corrected, accents in French words standardized, and inconsistencies of punctuation were brought into line with modern typographical practice including standardization of '-ize' endings. Chapter numbers are rendered as a single sequence, as in the serial.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF SHERIDAN LE FANU

- 1814 (28 August) Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu born 'at about half-past five o'clock AM' at 45 Lower Dominick Street, Dublin.
- 1815 With the appointment of his father as chaplain to the Royal Hibernian Military School, the family move to live in the Phoenix Park, west of the city.
- 1826 The family move to Abington, County Limerick.
- 1832 Enters the University of Dublin (Trinity College), primarily as a non-residential or 'country' student.
- 1831–6 The Tithe War; agrarian disturbances in County Limerick.
- 1832–3 Cholera epidemic in Ireland.
- 1838 (January) 'The Ghost and the Bone-setter', Le Fanu's first published story, appears in the *Dublin University Magazine*: a further ten pieces are published before October 1840; these are posthumously collected as *The Purcell Papers* in 1880.
- 1839 Called to the Irish Bar but does not practise.
- 1838–c.1841 Active in the Irish Metropolitan Conservative Association with Isaac Butt.
- 1840–73 Involved as proprietor and editor in various Dublin newspapers, notably the *Dublin Evening Mail* and *The Warder*.
- 1841 (March) Death of Catherine Le Fanu, his only sister.
- 1843 (March–April) Publishes 'Spalatro' in the *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1843 (December) Marries Susanna Bennett, daughter of George Bennett, QC.
- 1845 *The Cock and Anchor*.
- 1845–9 The Great Famine in Ireland.
- 1847 Promises his support to John Mitchel and Thomas Francis Meagher in their attempts to unite Irish public opinion on the topic of the Government's indifference to the Great Famine. Publishes *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien*, serialized in the *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1848 (March) Mitchel prosecuted for sedition: (April–June) Le Fanu publishes the three-part 'Richard Marston' in the *Dublin University Magazine*: (July) Rebellion in Ireland, led by William Smith O'Brien, MP for County Limerick.

- 1852 Unsuccessful attempt to get Tory nomination for County Carlow.
- 1856 Death of George Bennett, Le Fanu's father-in-law.
- 1858 Death of Susanna Le Fanu (née Bennett), Le Fanu's wife.
- 1861 Acquires control of the *Dublin University Magazine*, despite personal financial difficulties: the bulk of his writing from this date appears in there, including *The House by the Churchyard* (1861–3). Death of Le Fanu's mother.
- 1863 Begins association with London publisher Richard Bentley.
- 1864 *Wylder's Hand* and *Uncle Silas* appear in the *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1865 (September) first of a number of political articles (until September 1866) appears in the *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1869 'Green Tea' serialized in Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round*. Sells the *Dublin University Magazine*.
- 1871–2 'Green Tea' serialized in *The Dark Blue*.
- 1872 Publishes *In A Glass Darkly*, including 'Green Tea' and 'Carmilla'.
- 1873 (7 February) dies at 18 Merrion Square South, Dublin, formerly his father-in-law's home.
- 1880 Posthumous publication by Bentley of *The Purcell Papers* which collects stories formerly published in the *Dublin University Magazine* from 1838 to 1850 with a Memoir by Alfred Perceval Graves.

UNCLE SILAS

A PRELIMINARY WORD

THE writer of this tale ventures, in his own person, to address a very few words, chiefly of explanation, to his readers. A leading situation in this 'Story of Bartram-Haugh' is repeated, with a slight variation, from a short magazine tale of some fifteen pages written by him, and published long ago in a periodical under the title of 'A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess', and afterwards, still anonymously, in a small volume under an altered title.* It is very unlikely that any of his readers should have encountered, and still more so that they should remember, this trifle. The bare possibility, however, he has ventured to anticipate by this brief explanation, lest he should be charged with plagiarism—always a disrespect to a reader.

May he be permitted a few words also of remonstrance against the promiscuous application of the term 'sensation' to that large school of fiction which transgresses no one of those canons of construction and morality which, in producing the unapproachable 'Waverley Novels', their great author imposed upon himself? No one, it is assumed, would describe Sir Walter Scott's romances as 'sensation novels'; yet in that marvellous series there is not a single tale in which death, crime, and, in some form, mystery, have not a place.

Passing by those grand romances of 'Ivanhoe', 'Old Mortality', and 'Kenilworth', with their terrible intricacies of crime and bloodshed, constructed with so fine a mastery of the art of exciting suspense and horror, let the reader pick out those two exceptional novels in the series which profess to paint contemporary manners and the scenes of common life; and remembering in the 'Antiquary' the vision in the tapestried chamber, the duel, the horrible secret, and the death of old Elspeth, the drowned fisherman, and above all the tremendous situation of the tide-bound party under the cliffs; and in 'St. Ronan's Well', the long-drawn mystery, the suspicion of insanity, and the catastrophe of suicide;—determine whether an epithet which it would be a profanation to apply to the structure of any, even the most exciting, of Sir Walter Scott's stories, is fairly applicable to tales which, though illimitably inferior in execution, yet observe the same limitations of incident, and the same moral aims.

The author trusts that the Press, to whose masterly criticism and generous encouragement he and other humble labourers in the art owe so much, will insist upon the limitation of that degrading term to the peculiar type of fiction which it was originally intended to indicate, and prevent, as they may, its being made to include the legitimate school of tragic English romance, which has been ennobled, and in great measure founded, by the genius of Sir Walter Scott.

December, 1864.

TO THE RIGHT HON.
THE COUNTESS OF GIFFORD,*

AS A TOKEN OF
RESPECT, SYMPATHY, AND ADMIRATION,
THIS TALE IS INSCRIBED BY
THE AUTHOR.

CHAPTER I

AUSTIN RUTHYN, OF KNOWL, AND HIS DAUGHTER

IT was winter—that is, about the second week in November—and great gusts were rattling at the windows, and wailing and thundering among our tall trees and ivied chimneys—a very dark night, and a very cheerful fire blazing, a pleasant mixture of good round coal and spluttering dry wood, in a genuine old fireplace, in a sombre old room. Black wainscoting glimmered up to the ceiling, in small ebony panels; a cheerful clump of wax candles on the tea-table; many old portraits, some grim and pale, others pretty, and some very graceful and charming, hanging from the walls. Few pictures, except portraits long and short, were there. On the whole, I think you would have taken the room for our parlour. It was not like our modern notion of a drawing-room. It was a long room too, and every way capacious, but irregularly shaped.

A girl, of a little more than seventeen, looking, I believe, younger still; slight and rather tall, with a great deal of golden hair, dark grey-eyed, and with a countenance rather sensitive and melancholy, was sitting at the tea-table, in a reverie. I was that girl.

The only other person in the room—the only person in the house related to me—was my father. He was Mr. Ruthyn, of Knowl, so called in his county, but he had many other places; was of a very ancient lineage, who had refused a baronetage often, and it was said even a viscounty, being of a proud and defiant spirit, and thinking themselves higher in station and purer of blood than two-thirds of the nobility into whose ranks, it was said, they had been invited to enter. Of all this family lore I knew but little and vaguely; only what is to be gathered from the fireside talk of old retainers in the nursery.

I am sure my father loved me, and I know I loved him. With the sure instinct of childhood I apprehended his tenderness, although it was never expressed in common ways. But my father was an oddity. He had been early disappointed in Parliament, where it was his ambition to succeed. Though a clever man, he failed there, where very inferior men did extremely well. Then he went abroad, and became a connoisseur and a collector; took a part, on his return, in literary and scientific institutions, and also in the foundation and direction of

some charities. But he tired of this mimic government, and gave himself up to a country life, not that of a sportsman, but rather of a student, staying sometimes at one of his places and sometimes at another, and living a secluded life.

Rather late in life he married, and his beautiful young wife died, leaving me, their only child, to his care. This bereavement, I have been told, changed him—made him more odd and taciturn than ever, and his temper also, except to me, more severe. There was also some disgrace about his younger brother—my uncle Silas—which he felt bitterly.

He was now walking up and down this spacious old room, which, extending round an angle at the far end, was very dark in that quarter. It was his wont to walk up and down, thus, without speaking—an exercise which used to remind me of Chateaubriand's father in the great chamber of the Château de Combourg.* At the far end he nearly disappeared in the gloom, and then returning emerged for a few minutes, like a portrait with a background of shadow, and then again in silence faded nearly out of view.

This monotony and silence would have been terrifying to a person less accustomed to it than I. As it was it had its effect. I have known my father a whole day without once speaking to me. Though I loved him very much I was also much in awe of him.

While my father paced the floor, my thoughts were employed about the events of a month before. So few things happened at Knowl out of the accustomed routine, that a very trifling occurrence was enough to set people wondering and conjecturing in that serene household. My father lived in remarkable seclusion; except for a ride, he hardly ever left the grounds of Knowl, and I don't think it happened twice in the year that a visitor sojourned among us.

There was not ever that mild religious bustle which sometimes besets the wealthy and moral recluse. My father had left the Church of England for some odd sect, I forget its name, and ultimately became, I was told, a Swedenborgian.* But he did not care to trouble me upon the subject. So the old carriage brought my governess, when I had one, the old housekeeper, Mrs. Rusk, and myself to the parish church every Sunday. And my father, in the view of the honest Rector who shook his head over him—'a cloud without water, carried about of winds, and a wandering star to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness'*—corresponded with the 'minister' of his church, and was

provokingly contented with his own fertility and illumination; and Mrs. Rusk, who was a sound and bitter churchwoman, said he fancied he saw visions and talked with angels like the rest of that 'rubbitch'.

I don't know that she had any better foundation than analogy and conjecture for charging my father with supernatural pretensions; and in all points when her orthodoxy was not concerned, she loved her master and was a loyal housekeeper.

I found her one morning superintending preparations for the reception of a visitor, in the hunting-room it was called, from the pieces of tapestry that covered its walls, representing scenes, *à la Wouvermans*,* of falconry, and the chase, dogs, hawks, ladies, gallants, and pages. In the midst of whom Mrs. Rusk, in black silk, was rummaging drawers, counting linen, and issuing orders.

'Who is coming, Mrs. Rusk?'

Well, she only knew his name. It was a Mr. Bryerly. My papa expected him to dinner, and to stay for some days.

'I guess he's one of those creaturs, dear, for I mentioned his name just to Dr. Clay (the Rector), and he says there *is* a Doctor Bryerly, a great conjurer among the Swedenborg sect—and that's him, I do suppose.'

In my hazy notions of these sectaries there was mingled a suspicion of necromancy, and a weird freemasonry, that inspired something of awe and antipathy.

Mr. Bryerly arrived time enough to dress at his leisure, before dinner. He entered the drawing-room—a tall, lean man, all in ungainly black, with a white choker, with either a black wig, or black hair dressed in imitation of one, a pair of spectacles, and a dark, sharp, short visage, rubbing his large hands together, and with a short brisk nod to me, whom he plainly regarded merely as a child, he sat down before the fire, crossed his legs, and took up a magazine.

This treatment was mortifying, and I remember very well the resentment of which *he* was quite unconscious.

His stay was not very long; not one of us divined the object of his visit, and he did not prepossess us favourably. He seemed restless, as men of busy habits do in country houses, and took walks, and a drive, and read in the library, and wrote half a dozen letters.

His bed-room and dressing-room were at the side of the gallery, directly opposite to my father's, which had a sort of ante-room *en suite*, in which were some of his theological books.

The day after Mr. Bryerly's arrival, I was about to see whether my father's water caraffe and glass had been duly laid on the table in this ante-room, and in doubt whether he was there, I knocked at the door.

I suppose they were too intent on other matters to hear, but receiving no answer, I entered the room. My father was sitting in his chair, with his coat and waistcoat off, Mr. Bryerly kneeling on a stool beside him, rather facing him, his black scratch wig leaning close to my father's grizzled hair. There was a large tome of their divinity lore, I suppose, open on the table close by. The lank black figure of Mr. Bryerly stood up, and he concealed something quickly in the breast of his coat.

My father stood up also, looking paler, I think, than I ever saw him till then, and he pointed grimly to the door, and said, 'Go.'

Mr. Bryerly pushed me gently back with his hands to my shoulders, and smiled down from his dark features with an expression quite unintelligible to me.

I had recovered myself in a second, and withdrew without a word. The last thing I saw at the door was the tall, slim figure in black, and the dark, significant smile following me: and then the door was shut and locked, and the two Swedenborgians were left to their mysteries.

I remember so well the kind of shock and disgust I felt in the certainty that I had surprised them at some, perhaps, debasing incantation, a suspicion of this Mr. Bryerly, of the ill fitting black coat, and white choker, and a sort of fear came upon me, and I fancied he was asserting some kind of mastery over my father, which very much alarmed me.

I fancied all sorts of dangers in the enigmatical smile of the lank high-priest. The image of my father, as I had seen him, it might be, confessing to this man in black, who was I knew not what, haunted me with the disagreeable uncertainties of a mind very uninstructed as to the limits of the marvellous.

I mentioned it to no one. But I was immensely relieved when the sinister visitor took his departure the morning after, and it was upon this occurrence that my mind was now employed.

Some one said that Doctor Johnson resembled a ghost, who must be spoken to before it will speak.* But my father, in whatever else he may have resembled a ghost, did not in that particular; for no one but I in his household—and I very seldom—dare to address him until first addressed by him. I had no notion how singular this was until

I began to go out a little among friends and relations, and found no such rule in force anywhere else.

As I leaned back in my chair thinking, this phantasm of my father came, and turned, and vanished with a solemn regularity. It was a peculiar figure, strongly made, thick-set, with a face large, and very stern; he wore a loose, black velvet coat and waistcoat. It was, however, the figure of an elderly rather than an old man—though he was then past seventy—but firm, and with no sign of feebleness.

I remember the start with which, not suspecting that he was close by me, I lifted my eyes, and saw that large, rugged countenance looking fixedly on me, from less than a yard away.

After I saw him he continued to regard me for a second or two; and then, taking one of the heavy candlesticks in his gnarled hand, he beckoned me to follow him; which, in silence and wondering, I accordingly did.

He led me across the hall, where there were lights burning, and into a lobby by the foot of the back stairs, and so into his library.

It is a long, narrow room, with two tall, slim windows at the far end, now draped in dark curtains. Dusky it was with but one candle; and he paused near the door, at the left-hand side of which stood, in those days, an old-fashioned press or cabinet of carved oak. In front of this he stopped.

He had odd, absent ways, and talked more to himself, I believe, than to all the rest of the world put together.

‘She won’t understand,’ he whispered, looking at me inquiringly. ‘No, she won’t. *Will* she?’

Then there was a pause, during which he brought forth from his breast pocket a small bunch of some half-dozen keys, on one of which he looked frowningly, every now and then balancing it a little before his eyes, between his finger and thumb, as he deliberated.

I knew him too well, of course, to interpose a word.

‘They are easily frightened—ay, they are. I’d better do it another way.’

And pausing, he looked in my face as he might upon a picture.

‘They *are*—yes—I had better do it another way—another way; yes—and she’ll not suspect—she’ll not suppose.’

Then he looked steadfastly upon the key, and from it to me, suddenly lifting it up, and said abruptly, ‘See, child,’ and after a second or two—‘*Remember* this key.’