Uncle Silas: *Forms of Desire in the Gothic House*

Maria Conceição Monteiro*

Abstract: *This article will focus on the discourse of Maud Ruthyn, in Uncle Silas, by Sheridan Le Fanu, emphasising her personal and political power within a feminine Gothic frame, as a means of disclosing closed spaces that both imprison and free women. The experience of terror and desire shall be seen as a reading experience of liberation where fantastic elements function as a way of provoking uneasiness at the same time that it reveals that what is apparently "exaggerated beyond reality" may function as "difference" by – following Linda Hutcheon thought – multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality. I also intend to observe the way Le Fanu makes use of the classic Gothic genre as a metaphor for female experience, mainly through the most important element that constructs and deconstructs it: the house, that harbours the textures of gender, culture, and sexuality.*

In *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival*, G. J. Watson claims that in Irish literature "always lurking somewhere near the surface is a painful sense of a lost identity, a broken tradition, and the knowledge that an alien identity has been, however reluctantly, more than half embraced" (1979, 20).

In *Uncle Silas* (1864), by Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) the heroine, Maud, promises her aristocratic father, Austin Ruthyn, that she is prepared to "make some sacrifice" in order to restore the lost honour of their family name and tradition (Le Fanu, 102). A little further Austin stresses that "the character and influence of an ancient family is a peculiar heritage – sacred but destructible; and woe to him who either destroys or suffers it to perish!" (Le Fanu, 104). As we see, Austin's speech emphasises two important features of nineteenth century Anglo-Irish literature: its tendency to figure Anglo-Irish tradition – political and cultural – as an aristocratic dynasty, and its ambivalent characterisation of that tradition as both sacred and fragile. Thus Maud, willing to sacrifice to the family honour, indicates a related characteristic of Anglo-Irish literature, as already seen by Marjorie Howes: its persistent habit of encoding its discussion of tradition in representations

* Fluminense Federal University, Niterói, Brazil.

of gender and sexual issues (Howes, 1992, 165). In this light, the construction of femininity and the regulation of female sexuality can be observed in the narrative as a mirror of nineteenth century Anglo-Irish political anxieties.

The Anglo-Irish were a local ruling class whose pretensions to aristocracy obscured their strong middle-class character, and whose imaginative construction of an authoritative, aristocratic political and cultural tradition also obscured their dependence on English centres of power for their strength and legitimacy in Ireland. Like all traditions, the Anglo-Irish tradition was an invented one (to borrow Eric Hobsbawn's expression in *The Invention of Tradition*) whose asserted unity and stability over time and across groups of people sought to mask change and fragmentation. What was unusual about the Anglo-Irish was the degree to which change and fragmentation themselves became the consistent, identifiable characteristics of their invented political and cultural tradition. Because of their hybrid cultural status and tenuous political position, the Protestant Ascendancy imagined an Anglo-Irish tradition that was legitimating and empowering, but simultaneously broken, betrayed, and corrupt. As we shall see, *Uncle Silas* illustrates this ambivalent structure.

Sheridan Le Fanu wields to the Empire

It's well known that *Uncle Silas* is an expansion of a short story that Le Fanu originally published in 1833 under the title "Passage in the secret history of an Irish Countess", and which was reprinted in 1851, with some minor changes, as "The murdered cousin". Those short stories are set in Ireland. However, the novel had to obey Le Fanu's London publisher who demanded that the novel dealt with English settings and modern times. Accordingly, the author not only expanded his story but abandoned the Irish scene and set the novel in England, showing, thus, a clear concession to metropolitan powers.

While Le Fanu suppressed the overtly "Irish" aspects of the story by making geographical changes, he structured the text with Irish characteristics through its emphasis on sexual corruption and its preoccupation with Maud's femininity. To understand those aspects, it is necessary to observe the relationship between the Protestant Ascendancy and English imperialistic culture.

During the nineteenth century, British rule of Ireland underwent two related changes that crucially affected Anglo-Irish attitudes and anxieties. First, the number and complexity of agencies, institutions, and laws used to administer Ireland increased steadily over the course of the century, and second, during that period British domination shifted from a reliance on military and legal coercion to an increasing reliance on integrating the native Irish into the state apparatus. Increasing agitation for Catholic emancipation was a major cause of this shift, and the granting of emancipation was an important means of institutionalising it.

While mid-nineteenth-century British imperialist thought was characterised by new practical and ideological emphasis on assimilating the native Irish into the cultural and political structures of Britain, it was also characterised by profound anxieties about assimilation in its more threatening guises. The spectres that haunted the colonial and especially the Anglo-Irish imagination were racial assimilation that, it was feared, would sap the strength and purity of England, and assimilation as the descent of the British to the political and social level of the barbarous Irish, because assimilation was seen as the descent of the British to the political and social level of the barbarous Irish.

The history of the Anglo-Irish in the nineteenth century is one of a gradual diminution of wealth and power. Colonial discourses alternately allegorised Anglo-Irish relations as a family romance and expressed fear of just such a romance between Saxon and Celt on a limited level. As Howes points out assimilationist thought was both a basis for policy and a response to already existing political and social trends, expressing both the will to power of British imperialism and its fears of impotence and decay as well.

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, and governmental policy and rhetoric increasingly emphasised integration in a number of concrete ways, Anglo-Irish anxieties about their own weakness and tenuous hold on power focused more and more on the dangers of assimilation. The terms in which the prevailing discourses on the subject cast the possibilities for maintaining British imperial power in Ireland spelled the demise of the Anglo-Irish as a distinct group. Thus, for the Anglo-Irish to stay in power was also to become extinct. Due to this contradiction Anglo-Irish writers produced a Gothic version of the imperial romance of reconciliation. In *Uncle Silas*, for example, sexuality is represented as the agent of corruption and immolation rather than healthy assimilation; the same way political and dynastic strength is revealed as emptiness and weakness. So by having to shape the novel to accommodate the British reading public's taste, Le Fanu has presented the internal corruption of the Anglo-Irish and figured the political and cultural decline of the Ascendancy as the genealogical decay of a family dynasty in a Gothic setting. What can be observed is that in such a narrative the Anglo-Irish is represented less as victims of British indifference or Irish resentment than as victims of their own vices.

Thus, in the absence of specifically Irish setting, Le Fanu introduced the sexual corruption of Silas's mismatch with a lower-class Celt to suggest the novel's connections with the threatened Ascendancy. So, for instance, Silas's son from this marriage, Duddley, a coarse, brutal villain whom Maud finds repulsive, incarnates the family's degradation. Ironically, Silas describes Dudley as the culmination of precisely those hereditary qualities that Silas's marriage has imperilled in the Ruthyn family. He tells Maud that "Dudley is the material of a perfect English gentleman" (Le Fanu, 248-49) and [that] "a Ruthyn, [is] the best blood in England – the last man of the race" (325). This parodic combination of asserted cultural and genealogical purity with obvious barbarism and corruption is not merely an ironic comment on the disparity between what Silas imagines Dudley to

be and what he in fact is. It points to the Anglo-Irish fears that the well-bred English or Anglo-Irish gentleman might, on some level, be indistinguishable from the debauched barbarian; fears that deep affinities between Celt and Saxon were already established and partial assimilation was a natural fact.

The Gothic houses and femininity

In *Uncle Silas*, Le Fanu uses a Radcliffean Gothic frame which involves two houses, both in "hermetic solitude". One house is Knowl, the pastoral space, where Maud lives with her father. The other house is Bartram-Haugh, a decaying stone mansion with its secret passages and located rooms, where Uncle Silas lives in obscurity.

Le Fanu makes use of Gothic motifs of gloomy houses, ruins, ghosts, but he craftily transcends those apparatus, and instils into the narrative the terrifying ghostliness of the real world we know, a terror confined to the human consciousness that apprehends it. Thus he constructs a narrative which deals with internal corruption and decline. In this respect it is important to remember the comment made by Rosemary Jackson, who argues that as society became increasingly secularised during the nineteenth century, Gothic fiction came to embody the internal and the personal origin of horror, rather than external and supernatural sources (2000, 54)

Unlike Radcliffe's novels, however, *Uncle Silas* has a first person narrator, Maud, who tells her story. This technique is very effective to highlight the human, especially the female, as a means to move beyond patriarchy to some new form of social organisation.

When defining the "speaking subject", Émile Benveniste shows that "it is through language that man positions himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality" (1971, 224). So subjectivity comes into play through difference – by separating the "you" and the "I" – and is therefore relational: "not an essence but a set of relationships [...], which can only be induced by discourse, by the activation of a signifying system which pre-exists the individual, and which determines his or her cultural identity" (Silverman, 1983, 52). This signifying system – itself a process within cultural historical dynamics of a specific context – determines the gendered aspects of that cultural identity.

At Knowl, Le Fanu portrays a society composed of an inscrutable though kindly father, and a group of motherly servants. Father and daughter view their existence as being bound by family tradition and responsibility. Thus, Maud's direct inheritance is the responsibility to link past and present as part of her role in the family trust, a responsibility to carry along the future the guilt of the past.

If Knowl represents a place of containment of Maud within the family, then the journey to Bartram-Haugh, another Ruthyn possession, maps a still deeper procedure of enclosure within the family history. If Knowl represents the present, Bartram is the image of the house trapped in the past. Though Bartram is associated with decay, it is

also a place of action and knowledge, whereas Knowl, though it allows the heroine some movement, deprives her of social contact. Bartram is a place enclosed in itself, but where the heroine must trespass to gain knowledge and get in contact with the Other.

In the beginning Maud believed her uncle a generous person, however her lack of knowledge causes her to reject the thought of escape until it is too late, making her return to Bartram-Haugh as a prisoner. When she comes downstairs to confront Silas, looking like a phantom newly risen from the grave, he, surprised, asks her in a whisper: "where do you come from?", to which she replies: "Death! Death". Therefore, by accepting the reality of death, Maud validates her own perception of herself as a Gothic heroine, for Bartram-Haugh now stands revealed as her prison and its occupant a Gothic tyrant who plans her death.

Le Fanu questions the basis of the patriarchal house to provide a critique of gender and power relations. As we see, Gothicism intersects with gender. With reference to this point, it is worthwhile remembering Ellen Moers's work which is still legendary for its original celebration of the attractions of the excesses of Gothic romance for women writers and readers: "In the power of villains, heroines are forced to do what they could never do alone [...]. the Gothic castle, however much in ruins, is still an indoor and therefore freely female space" (Moers, 1978, 126).

In fact, Maud, through the exploration of indoor spaces, acquires knowledge about the tyranny of patriarchy. So, the haunted house signifies, to borrow Becker's words, the containment within traditional power structures; Gothicism is used then not only to expose but to exceed these homocentric structures and their control (Becker, 1999, 10).

In the manner of Radcliffe, such houses have become fortresses. Since they have become isolated from public life, they are displaced fields of considerable force which now turns inward, in order further to control the inmates of the house. The age and reclusiveness of their owners mirror the houses lack of a social function. Thus, when Maud escapes from such a house, she flees not so much from domestic captivity as from the morbid grip of an obsolete social system.

Maud and her readers must "detect" the house in order to reveal the corpses of its victims, and to demythologise the murderous aristocratic ghosts who still stalk its corridors. As Howes states, the necessity for negotiating between the Irish origins of *Uncle Silas* and the demands of the English literary market encouraged Le Fanu to encode the text's political concerns in the languages of sexuality, femininity, barbarism and civilisation, which characterised colonial discourses on the benefits and/or dangers of assimilating the Irish more thoroughly into England.

In *Uncle Silas* Maud's apparent escape from the decay represented by Bartram to the health represented by Knowl assumes the shape of her confrontation with the problematics of femininity. She negotiates the sexual dangers represented by Captain Oakley and Dudley Ruthyn, makes an appropriate match with Lord Ilbury and bears

him a son. By behaving in that manner, she achieves a socially acceptable femininity and is integrated into civilised society. She rejects forbidden sexualities and alliances, and chooses a permissible one that will ensure proper genealogical continuity, thus accomplishing her father's will.

Thus, according to such line of thought, the novel's linking of Knowl and Bartram suggests the internal corruption of Anglo-Irish tradition, and Maud's journey from the former to the latter and back again casts her as the physical embodiment of that link.

So, Maud's femininity provides a framework for the novel's depiction of Anglo-Irish tradition as fallen, broken, and betrayed from within through their alienated separation from English traditions and their intimate proximity to Irish ones. While on one level Maud successfully assimilates herself to the proper English civilisation represented by Ilbury, on another level the text suggests the inevitability of her surrender to the kind of Celtic assimilation that Anglo-Irish writers found so threatening.

Finally, we can say that Le Fanu makes use of the classic Gothic genre as a metaphor for female experience, mainly through the most important element that constructs and deconstructs it: the house, that harbours the textures of gender, culture, and sexuality.

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