

## Irish Writers on Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

**Elizabeth Bowen**, Intro. to *Silas Marner*, [rep. edn.] London: Cresset Press 1947; rep. in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee, Dublin: Poolbeg 1978:

'The hermetic solitude and the autocracy of the great country house, the demonic power of the family myth, fatalism, feudalism and the "ascendancy", outlook are accepted facts of life for the race of hybrids from which Le Fanu sprang. For the psychological background of Uncle Silas it was necessary for him to invent nothing. Rather he was at once exploiting in art and exploring for its more terrible implications what would have been the norm of his own heredity.'

[...]

*Uncle Silas* has always struck me as an Irish story transposed to an English setting [...]. Only while his contemporaries, the by then urbanised Victorian English, viewed the ancestral scene from the outside, that Irishman wrote out of what was in his bones.' (p.101.)

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

'He [Le Fanu] assumes importance and influence late in life when he found in sensational fiction a means to describe the extraordinary quality of his life, its urbanity and its closeness to violence. Essentially the common feature of his experience and of his fictional world is the idea of a society based on non-social assumptions, an experience outwardly social but really isolated and dangerously interior. Victorian Ireland is fascinating and relatively unknown, its daily routine a neglected part of the past which has moulded Yeats, Shaw, Parnell, and other distinctively modern figures. Its larger value as seen in Le Fanu's career can only be appreciated if we are prepared to make the connection between his failure to evolve a viable political stance in Ireland and his experiments in English sensationalism.' (p.8.)

'It is of course paradoxical that a rector's son, writing at the end of a humiliating and costly Tithe War, should choose as a persona a fictional O'Brien Costello; that he should maintain the device for twelve instalments is a striking indication of his need for some disguise. Le Fanu used the parish priest, sometimes as narrator, sometimes as a moral and religious standard in the stories, in much the same way that Maria Edgeworth used Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*. The priest, like the family retainer, was a privileged person with access to the secrets of a caste superior to his own. Any further uneasiness about a Papist narrator is largely dissolved by placing the stories in remote early decades of the previous century. The priest is by now safely dead; his papers relate confessions and adventures dating from the first years of his ministry. Here lies an advance over "Shamus O'Brien", for in choosing his historical milieu Le Fanu has moved back beyond the peasant-rebel to the heroic, defeated Jacobites whose lives were at risk in their own country. *The Purcell Papers* ... achieve an impressive opacity and distance in their historic setting.' (Ibid., pp.55-56.)

'Reversals of faith, death-bed exclamations of despair, ambiguous dual versions of supernatural themes, self-compelled if not self-inflicted deaths - these are the ingredients of tales which press back against an historical context, as if kept at arm's length by their author. Can it be accident that these stories should conclude the decade of the Le Fanus' disillusion with their country, of their humiliation in a religious guerrilla war, of their domestic distress?' (Ibid., p.61.)