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**THOSE WHO SEE AND THOSE WHO ARE SEEN:
THE ART OF DRAWING CHARACTERS IN J. S. LE FANU'S NOVELS**

The development of Le Fanu's art shows a tendency towards narrowing the number of his characters. The shift from his early historical romances – *The Cock and Anchor* (1845) and *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brian* (1847) – and from the “dish of village chat” of *The House by the Churchyard* (1861–1862) towards the psychological intricacies of his later novels is a shift from a mostly two-dimensional reality lavishly peopled by all sorts of human types and “humours” towards almost claustrophobic worlds where the scant number of human interrelations is in inverse proportion to their intensity.

From the point of view of the treatment of the outward appearance of his characters Le Fanu emerges, as in the case of his interiors, a direct opposite of Jane Austen. Almost every man or woman in his novels has a definite physical form forced upon the reader's imagination by the visual detail of his or her face, body, clothes, mimicry and gesture. This visual corporeality usually becomes the nucleus from which other levels of the character are developed or suggested.

Le Fanu seems to be fully aware of his tendency to create his characters first of all in terms of visual images, pictures, portraits, and sometimes he openly admits definite paintings as the source of his inspiration. Margaret Fanshawe, the main heroine of *The Tenants of Malory* (1867), from the very beginning of the novel shows a striking similarity to the portrait of Beatrice Cenci by Guido: “He could never have fancied, in flesh and blood, so wonderful an embodiment of Guido's portrait of Beatrice Cenci.”¹ The

¹ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Tenants of Malory* (London: Chapman, 1876[?]), p. 4.

inspiration of "Schalken the Painter" goes back to a Flemish painting, extensively described at the very beginning of the story, which suggested the female beauty and the sinister eroticism underlying the tale.² Sir Bale Mardyke from "The Haunted Baronet" is often described as resembling the later portraits of Charles the Second.

References to famous painters or paintings, together with a considerable number of allusions to classical literature, mythology and music may certainly serve as some of the many possible comments on the kind of audience to which Le Fanu was catering – the upper middle class tastes and snobberies of the *Dublin University Magazine* reading public are only too evident here. Some of these references are little more than manifestations of fashion, their attempted allegorical role being pretentious and superfluous rather than illuminating, for example, the painting of the death of Sappira in *The Rose and the Key*; "Cleopatra with the asps to her bosom" in "Carmilla;" or Hans Holbein's "Dance of Death" in *Wylder's Hand*.

The strong physical presence of Le Fanu's characters manifests itself by means of various techniques. Similar to the descriptions of his houses, Le Fanu sometimes relies on one longer description introducing a person for the first time and many short reminders of his appearance in the course of the narration. Thus, to the presentation of the figure and face of Alfred Dacre in *Haunted Lives* (1868) Le Fanu devotes almost a whole chapter (volume 1, chapter VII).

However strong the effect of those extensive, slowly drawn portraits of a character, it is with the short descriptions and descriptive hints that Le Fanu is at his best. Interwoven into narration and dialogue, without slowing down the action, they constantly force the character upon the reader, reveal the writer's stamina and consistency of imagination and, in his best novels and stories, become vitally relevant to the moral and psychological aspects of the portrayal.

The first two chapters of *A Lost Name* (1867–1868) consist mostly of dialogue which, however, is so strongly interwoven with references to the physical appearances of the interlocutors that, long before later chapters will bring a more explicit characterization of Carmel Sherlock, his physical particularities, which are a manifestation of his psychological idiosyncrasies,

² Le Fanu describes in detail a painting which he attributes to Godfried Schalken – a Dutch seventeenth-century artist, a disciple of Gerard Dou. Many particulars of the story point to the historical Schalken; the character of the painting also agrees with that of Schalken's art – a nocturnal scene illuminated by two sources of artificial light. I have not, however, succeeded in identifying the painting and I am inclined to believe, after Kel Roop, that: "Although no specific model has been found for the painting described by Le Fanu, it seems a composite of Schalken elements." K. Roop, "Making Light in the Shadow Box: The Artistry of Le Fanu," *PLL* 21/4 (Fall): 360.

are already established and firmly set in the world of the novel. That Sherlock is a neurotic becomes evident not so much from the things he says as from the way in which he says them. He is always making strange gestures, as if trying to occupy his restless hands: "Sherlock put his hands to his temple"; "passing his fingers through his long lank hair"; "rubbed his hands slowly together"; "pulled off his felt hat, and beat it slowly on the side of his leg"; "pointing with his finger stealthily across his breast"; "with the tip of his fingers to his lips." Constantly accompanied by the image of his "dreamy smile," "odd smile," "pallied smile," "doubtful smile" and the "deep sigh" or "long breath" often drawn by him during the scene,³ Carmel Sherlock is a character whose particularly strongly accentuated physical deportment not only makes him an important element of the visual world of the novel, but also becomes suggestive of his psychological intricacies.

The above characterization of Sherlock leads to two other features of Le Fanu's portrayal of people. Sherlock is an example of a character who is not only very strongly visualized at the beginning of the narrative, but also one whose picture is strikingly consistent throughout the whole novel. No matter in what situation Sherlock appears Le Fanu always remembers about his long lank hair, large dark eyes or pale face as well as about all the peculiarities of his gesture, which, though not identical, always conveys the same air of neurotic restlessness and lack of self-assurance. The range of Le Fanu's methods being very wide, we can, at the other extreme, find characters whose initial detailed and vivid picture will get blurred and faded in the course of the narrative. Little remains of the long descriptions of Alfred Dacre (*Haunted Lives*). As the story develops we have only vague references to "this heroic looking young man" (volume 1, p. 103), "this handsome cavalier" (volume 1, p. 105) or "the handsome hero of the opera" (volume 1, p. 135), and by the end of the third volume Dacre becomes a physical nonentity.

Sherlock's portrayal also represents Le Fanu's dynamic way of creating a character - showing him in motion. It is the gestures, movements, fidgetiness and deportment that constitute the visual portrait of Sherlock. Treating these motion pictures as one extreme we may pass through many modulations of this method and arrive finally at completely static portraits. Their number and role in Le Fanu's best novels as well as their conscious artistry show that it is through this mode of expression that his visual consciousness manifests itself most strongly.

The static portraits embrace detailed extended pictures as well as short descriptive glimpses of a character. The longer fragments are obvious to

³ J. S. Le Fanu, *A Lost Name, Temple Bar, 1867-1868*. chapt. I-II.

see and easy to analyze; the first description of Margaret Fanshawe in *The Tenants of Malory* is a typical example. She is sitting in a high panelled seat in church and is being intensely observed by Cleve Verney from an opposite pew. Notwithstanding some slight movements of her head the whole picture is primarily static – a feature strengthened additionally by the long span of time allotted to the observer – a whole Sunday service. Thus Cleve has time to notice the detail of her dress and exquisiteness of her features, to analyze her beauty with a connoisseur's eye, to try to sum up the general character of her face, to compare it to Guido's painting and, what is most vital for the novel, to remember the face or, using Le Fanu's favourite phrase, to allow the picture to "retain its hold on his retina" and, as a result, to haunt him "ever and anon."

The same haunting function is performed by the short descriptive fragments. They outnumber the long ones and, without stopping the narration or interrupting the dialogue, they show a character and imprint it "on the retina" of the person from whose point of view he or she is seen. The most effective descriptions of this kind are those inserted into passages with a slow, unhurried pace of narration – a very natural technique of conveying the uneventful, monotonous, sauntering lives of most of Le Fanu's protagonists, who, enclosed within the claustrophobic confines of their houses, experience things, when they do happen, particularly intensely. And this intensity of experience, this tendency to remember acutely, to be "haunted" by a person or a scene Le Fanu conveys first of all by means of visual pictures of people.

The importance of these pictures is reflected in various technical strategies employed to make them stand out of the background of narration and dialogue as forceful, memorable portraits. A glimpse at a person is very often made portrait-like by making the person's figure or face literarily framed – shown within a door-case, a window frame, narrow walls of a corridor or parted curtains. Numerous references to these natural frames range from casual hints – "He seemed to fill the tall door-case" (*Willing to Die*, 1872);⁴ "leaning a little against the oak window-frame" (*The Tenants of Malory*, p. 140); standing "between the voluminous silk curtains" (*Haunted Lives*, 1868)⁵ or "between the parting of the tall trees" (*The Tenants of Malory*, p. 33) – to pictures in which the frame, by becoming an integral part of the portrait, strongly intensifies its impact: "Just now the door silently opened, and Agnes Marlyn, like an evoked spirit, stood on the threshold with some flowers in her hand, doubtfully, and it seemed as if from within that old oak door-case, as from a stained window, a flood of wonderfully rich tints entered the room" (*A Lost Name*, chapter IV).

⁴ J. S. Le Fanu, *Willing to Die* (London: Downey, 1873), p. 7.

⁵ J. S. Le Fanu, *Haunted Lives* (London: Tinsley, 1868), p. 5.

An equally strong painting-like quality is achieved by accentuating the background of the portrait – a dark panelling, the blackness of night or darkness of a room; “The dark wainscoting behind him, and the vastness of the room, in the remoter part of which the light which fell strongly upon his face and figure expended itself with hardly any effect, exhibited him with the forcible and strange relief of a finely painted Dutch portrait” (*Uncle Silas*, 1864).⁶

Conceiving his characters in terms of painting is probably most strongly manifest in Le Fanu’s constant recourse to the chiaroscuro technique. The artist’s peculiar sensitiveness to the interplay of light and shade and its effect upon a human face is reflected in the particular care with which he introduces sources of light into his portraits in the dark (a fire, a candle, lightning) and sources of shade into the portraits in the sunshine (leaves of trees, passing clouds) or in changing the background of the portrait within the same scene (from a dark chapel the character suddenly goes out into bright sunshine). “The faint grey from the low lobby window was lost at this point, and the delicate features of the pale ecclesiastic ... were lighted, like a fine portrait of Schalken’s, by the candle only” (*Willing to Die*, p. 23); “the little chamber was darkened by the storm, and the successive flashes ... illuminated the stern features of the girl, and in their livid light, bereft them of their colour” (*A Lost Name*, chapter XIX); “The level light of the setting sun shone across his features with an odd abruptness of light and shadow” (*A Lost Name*, chapter XII); “The light visits it through the glorious old eastern window, mellowed and solemnised – and in this chiaroscuro, the young lady’s beauty had a transparent and saddened character ... Three-quarter, or full face, or momentary profile – in the shade, now – in light – the same wonderful likeness still” (*The Tenants of Malory*, p. 4).

Frequent use of the term “chiaroscuro,” references to masters of this technique (Schalken, Rembrandt), authorial comments on its effects (“In shadow and reflected lights there is sometimes a transparent effect which heightens beauty” – *Haunted Lives*, volume 1, p. 5) show how conscious Le Fanu’s portrait painting was. The importance which he attached to it is perhaps best seen in the fact that in case of less powerful descriptions, not suggestive enough to stand out by themselves, Le Fanu would often explicitly point to their intended role: “he looked on her ... as he might on a pretty picture” (*A Lost Name*, chapter ix); “her father ... looked at her as he might on a good picture” (*Guy Deverell*, p. 26); “The figure stood out against this background like a pale old portrait” (*Willing to Die*, p. 13); “he ... emerged for a few minutes, like a portrait with a background of shadow” (*Uncle Silas*, p. 2).

⁶ J. S. Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas* (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 192.

With some simplification made for the sake of clarity, Le Fanu's great number of human portraits can be divided into three groups – the beautiful, the ugly and the realistic – a division which strongly coincides with their hierarchy both in the plot and in society.⁷ The main characters come from the upper classes – elderly gentlemen – owners of country houses, and young daughters of gentlemen. Notwithstanding their frequent financial problems, impending ruin, disinheritance, illegitimacy, social or mental degradation, they are all of “noble birth” – a fact reflected not only in their manners, which might be part of realistic portrayal, but also in the strong idealisation of their appearance. Apart from some individual differences, all these ladies and gentlemen constitute the group of “the beautiful.” This conventional idealisation of the appearance of the upper class main hero and heroine is so strong that it is unthreatened even by another popular mannerism – the tendency to harmonize the good and the beautiful, and the evil and the ugly.⁸

In accordance with this tendency Le Fanu never forgets to suggest his upper class characters' moral flaws by means of visual physical signals in order to teach with truly Victorian confidence that bad morals will show in the body. This correspondence, however, is achieved in such a way that the beauty resulting from “noble birth” will usually remain easily detectable. Thus, Mark Shadwell's mimicry – his “accustomed sneer,” “satiric smile,” “smile of irony and anger, or a very frequent smile showing his glittering canine teeth – well correspond to certain negative aspects of his personality without, however, blurring his “genetic beauty”: “the bearing of the slight tall figure, and the pride and refinement of his still handsome features, were worthy of the old name he bore” (*A Lost Name*, chapter I).

Le Fanu's care to leave a physical stamp of moral flaw on his elderly gentlemen results in very interesting portraits, which, even if sometimes failing in the context of the whole novel, remain very convincing visually through the strongly marked idiosyncrasy of characteristic gesture or mimicry. Le Fanu's lesser success with the portraits of his young squires seems to be due to the fact that their appearance is particularly strongly conventional and stereotyped and, surprisingly, very effeminate. Almost all of the elements that constitute the faces of the young heroes are exchangeable with those from the portraits of women – oval faces, soft wavy hair, beautiful large eyes, long lashes, carmine lips, delicately pencilled eyebrows. As if the enumeration of such details was not sufficiently evocative, Le

⁷ Idealized visualization of some characters and realistic treatment of others is for M. Irwin a source of building a class-barrier into fiction. M. Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (London: Allen, 1979), p. 40.

⁸ For a discussion of this problem see: K. Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865–1900* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), pp. 28–34.

Fanu often explicitly underlines their feminine quality: "This face [Alfred Dacre's] was very feminine. There was colour in the cheeks, and a soft lustre in those large eyes, with their long lashes, and a soft carmine touched the lips. The waving hair lay low upon a very white forehead. Altogether, the tints and formation of the face were feminine and delicate" (*Haunted Lives*, volume 1, p. 74).

That the feminine look of a young hero was for Le Fanu important for making him attractive seems evident from the description of Marston in *The Rose and the Key* (1871). Having first presented Marston's masculine aspects – sunburnt, he is fishing in "those gigantic jack boots" and helping two ladies in distress to cross a stream – Le Fanu, while trying to show him as attractive to Maud, immediately mentions his "large dark eyes, and thick soft hair, and a certain delicacy of outline almost feminine."⁹ Whether an outcome of some peculiar personal aesthetics, or, as some critics try to suggest, homosexual tendencies,¹⁰ Le Fanu's visual portraits of his young heroes fail, these failures, however, are not a great loss to the novels since they correspond to the greater failure to conceive and create them as convincing human beings. None of them comes out as a fully imagined and realized personality, even when they claim to be title heroes (Guy Deverell, Mark Wylder, Torlogh O'Brian) – evidently, the weak imaginative powers manifested in their visual presentation reflect the writer's incapacity to create and portray fully convincing young gentlemen.

Le Fanu's young upper class girls are composed of exactly the same visual ingredients as their male counterparts – oval faces, soft hair, large eyes, long lashes, carmine lips, delicate features, slender figures. Differences in the colour of eyes and hair only further intensify the conventionality of these pictures – blue eyes and lighter shades of hair signal more passive personalities while darker haired girls may be expected to be more passionate or shrewd. Yet, in spite of these limitations, some of Le Fanu's female portraits are very successful; they stand out, force themselves "upon the retina" and bear relevance to the meaning of the novel. This happens in the cases when to the conventional kitsch pictures of carmine lips, violet eyes and long eyelashes Le Fanu masterly adds the toning colours of his backgrounds and the delicate tints of his subtle lights, shadows, half-shadows and half-lights. And it is these touches of the master's brush that, by catching the girl's momentary mood, unconscious glance or hardly visible blush or paleness, betray their personality or impress and influence those characters who are sensitive enough to register those transitory impressions.

⁹ J. S. Le Fanu, *The Rose and the Key* (New York: Dover, 1982), p. 15.

¹⁰ Cf. G. St. J. Barclay, *Anatomy of Horror: The Masters of Occult Fiction* (London: Weindenfeld, 1978).

Passing from beautiful faces to ugly faces in Le Fanu's novels means most often passing from the main to minor characters, and, in moral terms, from people who are either good or torn between good and evil to totally evil villains, whose moral blackness does not allow for even one white spot. To this group belong cunning dishonest lawyers, villainous owners of gambling houses, unprincipled money-lenders, cruel quack psychiatrists, pious hypocrites. Their role in the plots is that of the catalyzers of evil – by providing a proper opportunity or stimulus they make the evil inherent in the main protagonists erupt and work towards their destruction.

Le Fanu's villains have very strong physical existence, conceived again in accordance with the poetics of harmonizing the evil and the ugly. Extreme cases of Le Fanu's very ugly people are those whose descriptions verge on the grotesque, the macabre, and the morbid. In the description of Sir Roke Wycherley in *A Lost Name* such an effect is achieved by juxtaposing the natural and the artificial in this man's physiognomy. The natural – his old age and profligacy manifest in his sickly cheek, haggard look and a multiplicity of wrinkles – is set against devices simulating youth and beauty – a wig, a set of teeth, rouge, powder and black eye-liner. Even more grotesque and macabre is the look of Burton in dishabille in *A Strange Adventure in the Life of Miss Laura Mildmay*: "Mr Burton's teeth were gone, and his left eye was out, and a deep ugly hole was in the place of the organ. He had screwed his mouth into a grim grimace, and his face looked ever so broad, and ever so short. His whole face was crimson with the fire of brandy ... His lips were pursed and working, as they will over toothless gums ... On the dressing-table close by were two tumblers of water, in one of which were Mr. Burton's teeth, and in the other his glass eye."¹¹ This unexpected repulsiveness of otherwise respectable-looking Burton corresponds to his moral repulsiveness which is soon to be revealed. Similarly explicit is the message of the portrait of Nicholas Barden in *The Cock and Anchor*: "the blackness of habitually indulged and ferocious passion was upon his countenance."¹² Yet, even without such authorial keys to the interpretation, Le Fanu's descriptions of his villains are so obvious and unsophisticated that they raise little interest in the characters thus indexed.¹³ Le Fanu's ugly villains remain flat types whose

¹¹ J. S. Le Fanu, *A Strange Adventure in the Life of Miss Laura Mildmay* (London: Home, 1947), pp. 71–72.

¹² J. S. Le Fanu, *The Cock and Anchor* (London: Cassel, 1967), p. 138.

¹³ Cf. H. Van Thal, "Introduction," *The Cock and Anchor* (London: Cassel, 1967), p. X: "Nicholas Barden is a monster, and although he is depicted with none of the subtle shadings Le Fanu later learned how to employ, he is brought before us in every compelling detail of his frightful aspect."

presence is necessary merely to push the events into motion and whose intensely pronounced physical existence scarcely exceeds the role of intensifying the pictorial character of Le Fanu's world.

Apart from all those strongly highlighted faces and figures the Le Fanu world has also a great host of less prominent human portraits in which realistic portrayal predominates over the notorious mannerism of harmonizing beauty with nobility of birth and moral perfection, and ugliness with evil. These are usually descriptions of minor characters – footmen, maids, housekeepers, parsons, guests, cousins, neighbours – people whose physical tangibility reflects the Victorian tendency to show a man before allowing him to say or do something as well as Le Fanu's peculiar ability to see the world which he is going to present.

The above-mentioned considerations provide a rather confusing comment on Le Fanu's art of visualizing his characters. On the one hand we confront a writer who, by tending to create his richly peopled world mostly of stock characters that go back to the Gothic-melodramatic tradition, relies strongly upon such stereotyped visual ingredients as graceful figures, melancholy eyes, wavy hair or sinister grimaces. On the other hand, by adding to these conventionally beautiful or ugly portraits his masterful lights and shadows, by setting them against impressive backgrounds, he can highlight them to unusual expressiveness and intensity. This peculiar combination of the stereotyped and the unique is very unevenly dispersed throughout Le Fanu's works. In some of them he hardly goes beyond the ready-made pattern; in some he inserts pictures which, highly impressive in themselves, become yet blurred and lost within the pedestrian vision of the whole novel; there are also cases when it is through the intensity and impact of human portraits that the nucleus of the novel's powerful vision is generated.

That Le Fanu's first two novels – *The Cock and Anchor* and *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brian* – should rely almost entirely upon stereotyped portraits of men and women is not surprising, nor does it impair the novels' value. Both are typical novels of action, and the fact that the characters' conventional personalities are safely indicated by their conventional looks gives more prominence to the swiftly developing action, mounting suspense, unexpected solutions, narrow escapes and the novel's simple overall moral pattern – unsophisticated characterization assures easy satisfaction with the fall of the wicked and the triumph of the noble, a happy reunion of the faithful lovers included. Stencilled faces, bodies, gestures, clothes, conceived and realized according to a ready recipe, seem suited to these well-constructed, historically tinted light romances of adventure.

Nor do stereotyped descriptions of characters strike one as evident failure in *All in the Dark* (1866) – an exceptionally pedestrian sentimental love story in which conventional complications safely developing towards a happy end are not redeemed even by the “supernatural explained” motif woven around a superstitious old lady dabbling in occult lore. Weak imaginative powers are evident in every aspect of the novel, and the cheap ingredients of human portraits pass unnoticed in the context of the insipidity of the overall vision.¹⁴

A comparison of *Checkmate* (1870–1871) and *Wylder's Hand* (1863–1864) from the point of view of the physical presence of the characters illustrates two different modes of the treatment of the visual detail in Le Fanu's mystery-detective novels. In both of them a well constructed plot is the main *raison d'être* of the novel. In *Checkmate*, however, the suspense, false clues and unexpected solutions are conveyed mostly through narration and dialogue, description playing a very slight role in the novel. Paradoxically, of least impact are descriptions of characters, in spite of the fact that the pivotal clue to the mystery is a plastic surgery disfigurement of the main character's face.

Such a slight role of the descriptions of Longcluse's face which, though rich in possibilities, become, in the course of the novel, reduced to one more element of mystery which, when finally explained, troubles the readers no more, is due to the novel's narrative pattern. The story is presented by an omniscient narrator who very seldom identifies himself with the points of view of the characters, focussing, instead, his sole attention on skilfully manipulating and hiding crucial information from the reader. Such narrative technique, enriched additionally by a very ingenious motif of plastic surgery, results in a successful detective story – a fact mentioned and discussed by A. E. Murch in *The Development of the Detective Novel*.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, the fact that the world is very seldom seen through the eyes of the characters impoverishes the novel by cutting off the possibility of penetrating their minds. While becoming an important clue to reveal the objective truth of a crime, the descriptions of Longcluse's face fail to reveal the subjective truth about people.

The narrative scheme of *Wylder's Hand* is outrageously inconsistent even for pre-Jamesian standards. A minor character internal narrator, Charles de Cresseron, sometimes trespasses the plausibility limits of his own point

¹⁴ *All in the Dark* is dismissed by all Le Fanu critics as a failure. The only voice, not convincing for me, in favour of this novel is that of St John Sweeney: “Actually, *All in the Dark* is the highest and brightest of Le Fanu's novels ... On its own terms it is a droll, charming and successful work.” St John Sweeney, “Sheridan Le Fanu, the Irish Poe,” *Journal of Irish Literature* 15/1 (14 January).

¹⁵ A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (London: Owen, 1968).

of view by revealing his knowledge of other characters' thoughts and feelings – a practice not unknown among the mid-Victorian rather light-hearted handling of the point of view technique. Yet even allowing for some deficiencies in the Victorian aesthetics of narrative techniques, fragments in which Mr. de Cresseron becomes suddenly omniscient and omnipresent jar upon the reader's sense of realism. Le Fanu obviously succumbed here to the mystery plot which required presenting events that were happening simultaneously in different places at the cost of the plausibility of his narrator. This flaw is, however, compensated by those parts of the novel in which, trying to overcome the limitations of an internal narrator, Le Fanu makes de Cresseron acutely aware not only of what is said, but also of the mute language of glances, smiles, grimaces and gestures.

The poetic world of *Wylder's Hand* is gradually unrolled by a consciousness astoundingly sensitive to the physical dimension of the actors of the drama. In fact, what is seen is often more important than what is said, since, for various reasons, the characters avoid telling the truth. Mark Wylder and Stanley Lake tell lies because they do not want to reveal their not very noble plans of getting money and satisfying their whims; Dorkas Brandon is trying to hide her unaccountable passion for Stanley; Rachel Lake violates her natural sincerity to keep the secret of her brother's crime; Jos. Larkin, a cunning lawyer, handles various secrets skilfully enough to deceive others and to secure for himself the greatest profit; a number of minor characters are too well-mannered to say anything else other than conventional half-truths and insincere complements. In such a situation where the characters' strongly controlled words serve to hide the truth, their uncontrolled physical reactions reveal it.

The poetic world of *Wylder's Hand* depends so much upon descriptions of faces and bodies that not only de Cresseron but even the characters themselves read and interpret messages suggested by sly smiles, averted eyes, sudden blushes or paleness, ironic sneers or nervous twitchings. When Jos. Larkin voices his suspicion that Mark Wylder has been murdered it is Stanley's face that betrays him. The meaning of Stanley's grimace is immediately deciphered by the cunning attorney whose triumphant gaze, in turn, informs Stanley that the message has been read correctly. This mute dialogue of facial expressions shows Le Fanu at the height of his art of registering the detail of his characters' visual portraits and making full use of their potentialities to mount suspense and convey meaning:

Stanley Lake's countenance underwent such a change as convinced the attorney that some indescribable evil had befallen Mark Wylder, and that Captain Brandon Lake had a guilty knowledge thereof. With this conviction came a sense of superiority and a pleasant confidence in his position, which betrayed itself in a slight frown and a pallid smile, as he looked steadily in the young man's face, with his small, crafty, hungry eyes.

Lake knew that his face had betrayed him. He had felt the livid change of colour, and that twitching at his mouth and cheek which he could not control. The mean, tyrannical, triumphant gaze of the attorney was upon him, and his own countenance was his accuser.¹⁶

Registered by a very sensitive and inquisitive observer, the solidity of the physical dimension of the characters saves *Wylder's Hand* from being merely a one-reading mystery story. Unlike *Checkmate*, in which, after the unravelling of the mystery very little is left to tempt the reader to another perusal of the three volumes, *Wylder's Hand* can still offer the enjoyment of subtle suspense struck on each confrontation of **words heard** with **pictures seen** by the narrator.

Equally intense human portraits in *A Lost Name* serve a different purpose. In only a slight degree do they contribute to the mystery which is subsidiary in its impact to the motif of the psychological break-down of the main character. The story of *A Lost Name* is not very promising. Mark Shadwell, a middle aged gentleman, neglects his devoted, but unattractive wife, elopes with and finally marries his daughter's governess and, discovering her faithlessness, commits suicide. In the meantime he also kills, in a fit of passion, his cousin, who seems a threat to his property and a rival in love. Within this outrageously melodramatic frame Le Fanu inserts quite a successful portrait of a middle aged gentleman whose emotional entanglement with a young adventuress is made convincing thanks to descriptions of the girl seen through Mark's eyes.

Mark can relish feminine beauty and within the slow uneventful life in a country house, looking from time to time at Agnes is a perfect pastime for him – pleasure granted without any effort. He is strongly self-confident that his increasing interest in Agnes is totally counterbalanced by his stoicism, which will keep him cool-headed enough to enjoy the pleasure without any serious involvement. Yet, when the passive contemplation of the girl's beauty passes into noticing and then interpreting the expressions of her face, the subtle borderline between the safe and the dangerous is trespassed.

Chapter XVII, entitled "A Moonlit Walk – Another Step," is the climax of the development of Mark's interest in Agnes, and the last psychologically convincing fragment of the novel. The scene is an interplay of Mark's words, which flow freely to provoke conversation and thus prolong their walk together, Agnes' smiles, blushes and glances, and Mark's thoughts interpreting them. Though constituting the bulk of the chapter, Mark's words are the least important of these three elements – the "conversation," in fact, takes place between the constantly changing picture of Agnes and the reading of it by Mark, which, tragically for him, is wrong. When, in response to a hint about his daring ambitions frustrated because of the

¹⁶ J. S. Le Fanu, *Wylder's Hand* (New York: Dover, 1978), pp. 268–694.

insipidity of his wife, Agnes throws upon him a sharp, momentary glance, Mark, from whose point of view the scene is consistently presented, reads in it great admiration of an equally daring kindred spirit: "Miss Marlyn glanced upon him a kindling look – something wild, fiery, admiring." The influence which this image has on Mark suggests that the admiration of a beautiful, intelligent woman at last answered some suppressed craving in the morose egotist: "that wild, glad, momentary look haunted him – it was inspiring ... That look of strange admiration seemed burning in the darkening sky, on the grass, on the dark background of distant foliage – wherever he gazed." The final note of this chapter is less successful artistically, but equally forceful in its message. A delicate blush on Agnes' face which was „like the sparkle and flush of champagne in his veins and in his brain, as he went to his study that night" shows clearly that the visual image of Agnes, with the false meaning read into it by Mark, has not only got hold of his imagination, but also aroused his emotions.

After the discovery of Agnes' secret understanding with Sir Roke, Mark's infatuation with the girl mingles with wounded pride, jealousy, desire for revenge, hatred of Sir Roke and partly Agnes. Having killed Sir Roke in a fit of rage, Mark is also troubled by fear of discovery and some sense of guilt. Blackmailed by Agnes, who accidentally discovered that he was the murderer, Mark elopes with her, marries her after the death of his wife, and, finding her unfaithful, commits suicide. The introduction of the motif of crime and detection changes the character of the novel. Trying to provide the reader with false clues Le Fanu shifts the emphasis in the point of view of the narrator who now cannot freely identify himself with Mark – the murderer whose motives have now to be concealed. Thus insights into Mark's thoughts are less frequent and, when present, they tend to take the form of the narrator's arbitrary comments which, in the highly melodramatic context of the novel, seem stereotyped and unconvincing. Occasionally mentioning that the image of Agnes still haunts Mark is a poor substitute for the slow, gradual bewitchment performed before the reader in the first part of the novel. Probing Mark's psyche by means of images of Agnes saves him from becoming a totally unconvincing melodramatic villain, makes at least one fourth of *A Lost Name* a novel worth reading, and again shows that Le Fanu's most successful characters are those through whose eyes the visual world is being slowly perceived and interpreted.

This stresses the importance of the point of view of the narrator, which, though significant also in the case of descriptions of houses and landscapes, becomes particularly vital for the meaning of the descriptions of people. Le Fanu's landscapes or interiors become projections of a character's fears and anxieties when seen through his or her own eyes, but they can also

breed metaphorical overtones and bear relevance to the final reading of the novel when shown by a distanced commentator. With descriptions of people Le Fanu is less successful – his great gallery of portraits is most often so stereotyped and so easy to classify into sentimental-melodramatic types that it fails to add any vital dimension to the novel. Yet, when filtered through the consciousness of the main character, deformed or idealised, deciphered correctly or misinterpreted – facial expressions or movements of the body become a powerful vehicle for revealing human personality. In *Wylder's Hand* Le Fanu achieved it thanks to such gross inconsistencies in the narrative technique as making his first person narrator frequently omniscient; in *A Lost Name* he put the greatest stress upon the point of view of Mark Shadwell and, until the motif of detection intervened, made him the central consciousness of the novel; in *Uncle Silas* and *Willing to Die* he hit upon the best technique in this respect – the main character as the first person narrator.

Uncle Silas shares with *The House by the Churchyard* the position of Le Fanu's best known and most highly appreciated novel. Until the eighties its fame rested entirely upon its being a very well-written mystery – "the Victorian mystery story par excellence."¹⁷ In 1980 McCormack's analysis brought the most thorough, challenging, and, I think, controversial, interpretation of this novel in terms of the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence.¹⁸ In the light of the present analysis *Uncle Silas* is a very well written mystery story and at the same time an interesting psychological study of a young girl's progress from innocence to experience in her evaluation of people and their motives.

Though with evident Radcliffian echoes,¹⁹ *Uncle Silas* is quite an ingenious mystery. The title hero, Silas Ruthyn, is a man of very conspicuous character – strange and eccentric in his ways, ruined through gambling, difficult to live with, and suspected of a crime. Yet, according to the will of his brother, Austin Ruthyn, Silas is to be the warden of Austin's daughter, Maud; moreover, in case of Maud's death before coming of age, Silas would be the only successor to her quite considerable fortune. Leaving such a will, Maud's father wanted to give Silas a means of rehabilitating himself in public esteem and of regaining his long lost self-dignity. Resolved to fulfill her dying father's will, Maud goes to Bartram Haugh, her uncle's abode. Her stay there is disturbed by many unpleasant and apparently

¹⁷ E. F. Bleiler, "Introduction," *Uncle Silas* (New York: Dover, 1966), p. VI.

¹⁸ St John Sweeney considers McCormack's interpretation "an extraordinary over-reading." St John Sweeney, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ See: J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak, "Uncle Silas – a Link between the Gothic Romance and the Detective Novel in England," *Studia Anglica Poznaniensia* 12 (1980).

dangerous annoyances in spite of which Maud cannot yet suspect her uncle of being guilty of any malignant design against her. She remains unsuspecting almost till the end of the novel which solves all the mysteries. Hidden behind a curtain, Maud witnesses a foul, deliberate murder meant for her but accidentally executed upon her governess. This brutal scene not only reveals Silas' personality and designs, but it also provides the circumstantial detail missing to prove him guilty of another murder committed many years ago.

The first part of the novel – Maud's life in her father's house at Knowl – is pervaded by a very strange emotional atmosphere resulting from Austin Ruthyn's personality and style of life. Maud, who, when the story opens, is seventeen, is brought up only by her father, an old man past seventy, who, since the death of his wife has become not only a recluse declining any social or political involvement, but also an ardent disciple of Swedenborg, devoting all his time to the study and contemplation of the Swedish mystic's revelations. Austin's lack of common sense and firm stand on the earth manifests itself most strongly in his treatment of Maud. Though he loves his daughter and, in his own way, cares for her, Austin is incapable of communicating with the girl. Preoccupied with his own thoughts he hardly ever speaks to her and, when compelled to inform her about something important, he talks to her by understatements, half-truths or parables, believing her too immature to comprehend the whole truth or too young to take it without being frightened.

Protected so strangely from reality Maud lives in the quiet, monotonous world of Knowl among riddles and enigmas. Nothing that surrounds her is certain, clear, or unambiguous. All answers to the questions that trouble this intelligent and sensitive girl are only hazy suppositions, vague guesses, and evasive conjectures.

The narration in *Uncle Silas* is a constant intermingling and merging of two points of view; that of Lady Maud – a mature woman, wife of Lord Ilbury, looking in retrospect on her early youth, and that of Maud – a seventeen year old adolescent confused and bewildered with the world around her. While both points of view are used effectively for the presentation of the mystery plot, it is mainly through the latter one that the psychological dimension is achieved. The characterization of Maud is most dramatic and convincing when Lady Maud manages to identify herself totally with the nervous, imaginative girl at Knowl and shows the world seen through her innocent eyes.

Maud's dilemmas are caused by people; it is people whom she cannot understand properly and properly pigeon-hole into the good and the evil. In the seclusion of Knowl, where nobody wants or is allowed to treat her as a partner for conversation (even the servants are obliged by the master

not to mention certain topics to the girl), Maud makes her own evaluations of people mainly on the basis of their looks. She has time to scrutinize faces and portraits, to brood over them and to form her own adolescent and idealized versions of the personalities hidden behind their visual forms. Of all the attempts to convey Maud's vague and uncertain notion of her father the most effective is the picture of Austin who is silently walking up and down a room being all the time watched by Maud motionlessly seated in a chair. Lighted only by a fireplace and some wax candles, the spacious, irregular room has one completely dark quarter into which the figure of the old man regularly disappears and out of which it emerges.

Emerging and disappearing, approaching and going away, ceaselessly oscillating between light and darkness, this image of Maud's father, or phantom of a father, is the most effective rendering of Maud's confused feelings about Austin – her failure to grasp his personality, her always frustrated desire to understand him, her constant doubts as to whether, through his strange religion, he walks in light or in darkness.

Similar emotional ambivalence and confusion is suggested by the last two pictures of Austin registered by Maud's memory before his death. The first is "such an approving smile as you might fancy lighting up the rugged features of a pale old Rembrandt" (p. 103); the second is a face distorted by agitation: "His gathered brows, glowing eyes, and strangely hectic face, and the grim compression of his mouth, still showed the agitation" (p. 105). The first image reassures Maud, the second "shocks [her] and alarms" (p. 105). Maud never fully decides which image reveals her real father: the smile or the compressed mouth, the figure in the light or the figure in the darkness. Even during the most difficult part of her ordeal Maud is not courageous enough to unveil her father's egocentrism, outrageous lack of realism and blind urge to vindicate his family name at any cost. Consciously or unconsciously, she prefers to remember him as the enigma suggested by his first image in the novel – constantly emerging out of darkness and into darkness fading away. Maud's three repeated refusals to see Austin after his death metaphorically correspond to her refusal to accept an objective picture of her father and show at the same time how important for this sensitive girl were the visual portraits of people around her.

Of all the human portraits that imprint themselves upon Maud's imagination most interesting are those of Silas Ruthyn. Being vitally important for Maud, they also provide the most typical example of Le Fanu's peculiar inclination to show his immature protagonists making moral evaluations on the basis of people's looks. Maud has formed her own firm opinion of her uncle long before she meets him in person and registers his real, flesh and blood picture, on the basis of his two portraits hanging on the walls of Knowl – a crayon oval miniature of an eight year

old child and a full length oil portrait of Silas as a young man. Scanty gossip, scraps of information, hints and whispers about Silas pique her curiosity, draw her thoughts towards the personality of her uncle and make her search for meaning hidden behind the oil representation of "a singularly handsome young man, dark, slender, elegant . . . with a masculine force in that slender oval face, and a fire in the large, shadowy eyes, which were peculiar, and quite redeemed it from the suspicion of effeminacy" (p. 10).

The first stage of Maud's attempt to absorb the message of the portrait is fascination with the beauty and elegance of the model, temptation to come closer to the "many-coloured circles of mystery" and a presentiment of some significance of this portrait for her: "the handsome features seemed to smile down upon my baffled curiosity with a provoking significance" (p. 11). The second stage begins when Lady Knollys gives Maud the available information about Silas. Maud learns many facts about Silas' life, each of them, however, containing something that has not been quite ascertained, clarified, motivated. Thus, Silas still remains a mystery, but Maud's musings can now feed on some tangible facts with which her easily excitable adolescent imagination paints a very romantic background for her intriguing handsome hero:

There stood the rou – the duelist – and, with all his faults, the hero too! In the dark large eye lurked the profound and fiery enthusiasm of his ill-starred passion. In the thin but exquisite lip I read the courage of the paladin, who would have "fought his way," though single-handed, against all the magnates of his country, and by ordeal of battle have purged the honour of the Ruthyns. There in that delicate half-sarcastic tracery of the nostril I detected the intellectual defiance which had politically isolated Silas Ruthyn and opposed him to the landed oligarchy of his country, whose retaliation had been a hideous slander. There, too, and on his brows and lip, I traced the patience of a cold disdain. I could now see him as he was – the prodigal, the hero, the martyr (p. 60).

Maud's decision to go to Bartram is an outcome of some logical arguments, some impassioned evaluation of the situation, a dutiful wish to fulfill the father's will, but, above all, she is governed by impulses and emotions stirred by the portrait of Silas and the images of her father's face. The oil canvas makes her desire to vindicate the hero of her romance: "Some day it might come to pass that I . . . might contribute by word or deed towards the vindication of that long-suffering, gallant, and romantic prodigal" (p. 60); her father's approving Rembrandt smile which lightens his face twice on Maud's agreement to "make some sacrifice to clear that name" (p. 103) assures her of the moral rightness of the mission; and when she begins to hesitate and think her first decision too rash, the strange contortions of her father's face seen in a feverish nightmare finally convince her to the contrary: "This night my dear father's face troubled me – sometimes white and sharp as ivory, sometimes strangely transparent like glass, sometimes all hanging in cadaverous folds, always with the same

unnatural expression of diabolical fury" (p. 170). Maud's last moments at Knowl spent on solitary musings before the portrait, her wish to "fix it well and vividly" in her memory, and her hope that she "might still trace some of its outlines and tints in its living original" (p. 178) not only show how important the pilgrimage to see Silas was for the girl; the scene also suggests Maud's readiness to face a confrontation of her chimeras with reality.

The opportunities to see Silas at Bartram are surprisingly rare. Only on very few occasions is Maud summoned to her uncle's room to hear what he has to say. Each audience is accompanied by a long description – a visual portrait of Silas eagerly studied and registered by Maud. Unlike the oil painting at Knowl, the living portrait constantly changes, transforms itself from visit to visit, each time baffles her with new meanings and gradually grows more and more evasive and mystifying: "I had seen him; but he was still an enigma and a marvel. The living face did not expound the past, any more than the portrait portended the future. He was still a mystery and a vision" (p. 197). Thus, not only Maud's ordeal has proved useless – instead of vindicating Silas' name she provided him with an opportunity to seal its irrevocable debasement – but also her pilgrimage to the original of the oil portrait has become frustrated; instead of discovering the personality of her hero she found an even more uncertain and baffling image.

The scene of the murder, which Maud accidentally witnesses, is a very effective climax of the novel both from the point of view of the detective mysteries of the plot and of the psychological image of Maud. The murder and the discoveries resulting from it univocally reveal Silas' designs, his perfidious stratagems, his cruelty, brutality and lack of scruples. It also shows that the real character of Silas, the final moral judgement on him, had to be provided for Maud – without the tangible proof of the scene which she saw with her own eyes she would not have been able to make this judgement herself, to arrive unaided at an objective, mature awareness of the evil hidden behind the handsome, the venerable, and the romantic.

Throughout her painful pilgrim's progress towards maturity Maud has come on her own to the conclusion that ugly people may be good; she has been shown that the beautiful may be evil; she has also reached the humble realization that her evaluations may be erroneous. The novel ends on Lady Maud's supplication for right moral judgements: "May the blessed second-sight be mine – to recognize under these beautiful forms of earth the ANGELS who wear them; for I am sure we may walk with them if we will, and hear them speak" (p. 436). Like in most of Le Fanu's best works this final note is ambiguous. For McCormack it is a strong argument for reading the novel in terms of Swedenborgian visionary realities;²⁰ in the

²⁰ W. J. Mc Cormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), chapt. V.

context of Maud's emotional growth it shows her new awareness that external look may mislead, but it also suggests that Lady Maud will still be inclined to classify people rigidly into either the good or the evil. On the other hand, the multitudinous ambivalent portraits of her father and uncle, in which fascination mingles with repulsion, attraction with dread, doubts with certitude, seem to imply that she may be capable of crossing the borderline between adolescent simplifications and mature comprehension of the complexities of human nature. Will she ever attempt further reevaluations of the portraits that haunted her girlhood? Will she find human traces in the morally ruined, degraded opium-eater who sentenced her to death through his deed? Will she ever see selfishness and egocentrism in the stern visionary father who sentenced her to death through his negligence? The visual portraits of the Ruthyn brothers suggest a positive answer; Lady Maud's desire to recognize "ANGELS" shows little hope of such development.

The level of emotional growth which Maud Ruthyn either will or will not attain is achieved by Ethel Ware, the heroine of Le Fanu's last novel - *Willing to Die*. Much of this novel's poetic force derives from the highly suggestive imagery of the country house at Malory. Alongside the images of the house, which allow us to decipher the girl's neurotic tendencies to hide within small, enclosed nooks, to grope intuitively for the safety of a friendly shelter, the novel also abounds in visual portraits of the scanty number of people whom Ethel saw, usually enframed within the embrasure of the window through which she used to observe the world.

The facts that constitute Ethel's life are very different from those that mark Maud's vicissitudes, but the main motif of experience through which both the girls pass is analogous. Ethel, too, forms her evaluations on the basis of people's external looks and, through bitter experience, comes to reevaluate most of her judgements. Ethel's misinterpretations are sometimes even more gross, for her story begins when she is a small child and reads traces of nursery tale monsters on the faces of real people; they are also more intimate, for with the original of one of the most intriguing portraits she falls in love and thus bring upon herself bitter and long suffering.

The narrative pattern in *Willing to Die* is also very similar to that in *Uncle Silas*. Ethel as a mature woman recollects her youth and, in most cases, shows the images that haunted her then through the eyes of Ethel - the child, and Ethel - the young girl. An important difference, however, results from the difference of the age and personality of the grown-up narrators. While penning her story, Lady Maud is a happy wife and mother most probably in her early twenties; Ethel Ware begins to write her account as a forty-one year old spinster resigned to spend the rest of her life in solitude. Hence, the tension resulting from the discrepancy between the world seen through the innocent eyes and the comment sifted through the

experienced mind is much stronger in *Willing to Die*. The conclusions at which Ethel arrives also reach much further than those of Maud. She manages to go beyond the simplified classification into the good and the evil: "the good here are not without wickedness, nor the wicked without goodness" (p. 409); through her "emotion recollected in tranquility" she formulates profound questions on human nature: "Why is it that man so differs from man? Why does he often so differ from the noble creature he might have been, and sometimes almost was?" (p. 411); with the image of her dead lover before her eyes she seems to be reaching towards complex metaphysical dilemmas: "In the wonderful working that subdues all things to itself – in all the changes of spirit, or the spaces of eternity, is there, shall there never be, from the first failure, evolved the nobler thing that might have been?" (p. 412).

The most important similarity between *Uncle Silas* and *Willing to Die* – the theme of the main character's growing awareness of her immature misjudgements of people, as well as the differences – the personalities of the two women and the reevaluations at which they arrive – might provide very interesting material for research concerned with the intriguing personality of Le Fanu himself, particularly in light of the fact that the novels are separated by a span of eight years and that *Willing to Die* was written a year before the writer's death. For research concerned with Le Fanu's artistry these two novels represent the crowning achievement of his handling of descriptions of people.

Being always very sensitive to the visual portraits of his characters Le Fanu was not always successful in making them an integral part of the whole novel. Some of his very impressive portraits get blurred and dissolve in the course of reading (*Guy Deverell*, *Haunted Lives*); some of them masterfully increase the suspense of separate scenes, with slight, if any, contribution to the plot (*Checkmate*); some help to motivate convincingly the characters' reactions accentuating at the same time the dramatic pulsation of the plot (*Wylde's Hand*). In *Uncle Silas* and, to a great degree, in *Willing to Die* Le Fanu achieves the strongest integration between descriptions of people and the composition of the novel. Visual images of people who intrude upon the imagination of the young protagonists skilfully contribute to the plots of the novels by drawing the girls into physical dangers and baffling them, as well as the reader, with riddles and mysteries; by provoking the girls to face dilemmas and make moral evaluations they generate the main theme of the novels; by becoming, thanks to a consistent viewpoint, projections of their anxieties and emotional confusions, they represent Le Fanu's mastery of revealing the psyche of **those who see** by the images of **those who are seen**.²¹

²¹ The article includes some aspects of the ideas presented in: J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak, *Picture and Meaning: The Visual Dimension of Sheridan Le Fanu's Fiction* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1991).