

An English Cover-Up: Masks, Murders, and English Cruelty in Goncourt, Lorrain, and Schwob

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Fin-de-siècle writers from diverse disciplines were drawn to the seductive potential of masks and disguise; mask-wearing characters of indefinite identity, indeterminate gender, and insecure psychology proliferate in their texts. However, when characters are designated as English in such stories, they are also, and with remarkable frequency, associated with cruelty or murder: the mask-wielding murderers of Marcel Schwob's 'MM. Burke et Hare, Assassins' carry out their crimes in Britain upon British victims; Edmond de Goncourt weaves his theatrical narrative around the mask-like demeanour of Lord Annandale in *La Faustin*; and Jean Lorrain's malicious Lord Ethal exacerbates the Duc de Fréneuse's perverse obsessions with masks in *Monsieur de Phocas*. This article explores this unexpected correlation, and examines the ways that English masks are used as narrative devices – at once to mould and play with national distinctions, and to reflect upon the psychological state of the French subject.

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Fin-de-siècle society was fascinated by masks. The Goncourt brothers scattered their diaries with anecdotes from a dozen masked balls; the Orientalist exhibits of the Expositions universelles were filled with masks from Africa, the Americas, and the Far East; and artists such as Paul Gauguin, James Ensor, and Odilon Redon played with the imagistic and symbolic qualities of masks in their visual art. The pages of literature dance with the vague faces of masked figures: Renée wears a mask and domino to attend Blanche Muller's party in *La Curée* (1871); Maupassant dresses an old man in a complex full-head mask so he can deny his advanced age and flirt at parties ('Le Masque', 1889); the tragic, disguised figure of Pierrot is evoked recurrently by the pens of Stéphane Mallarmé and J.-K. Huysmans; and Marcel Schwob sketches quasi-allegorical masked characters in 'Le Roi au masque d'Or', the red-masked salt thieves of 'Les Faux-Saulniers', and the plague victims who cried wolf in 'La Peste' (in *Le Roi au masque d'or*, 1892).

Literary scholarship has approached this mask-ophilia – particularly in Jean Lorrain’s works – from a rich variety of perspectives, with particularly fruitful attention to issues of vision, obfuscating language, and gender identity.¹ However, there is also a question of national identity at stake in many of these narratives. Characters who bear masks and are designated specifically as English are associated, and with remarkable frequency, with cruelty or murder – in a correlation unique to this nation. Such a representational choice is particularly notable as English (and occasionally British) characters had long been a stock of trade of French literature without this association having manifested before the fin de siècle. A wide range of characteristics had been and still was attributed to the English by French authors, such as the unattractive but independent spinster (who dines in Des Esseintes’s station cafe in *À rebours*); the perfect, self-sacrificing mother figure (in Hector Malot’s *Sans famille*); the buffoonish but heart-warming middle- and upper-class lovers who get into romantic scrapes (in Henrietta Consuelo Sansom’s *Mylord et Mylady*); and the desperately melancholic but dignified soul (including Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s Lord Ewald in *L’Ève future* and Maupassant’s ‘Miss Harriet’). They may seem emotionally maladroit for the French reader, but they do not typically revel in the suffering of others or deceive the reader with a complex personality or a false mask; they may be taken at face-value, and as such are welcome additions to the catalogue of *types* on which realism is built – with the added benefit that few French readers would cross the Channel to check their veracity.

Yet adding literal masks and the specific lexicon of masking into narratives of English characters changes the way in which the reader is encouraged to interpret them. When presented with stereotypes, the *lisible* text encourages an uncritical attitude to characterization, in which a set of assumptions about the inherent nature of a certain kind of person is essential to the smooth functioning of the narrative: stereotype disregards real depth for surface simplicity. However, once a mask is added to the formula, the reader must take a

different stance: now, the surface indicates that there *are* hidden depths, but refuses the reader access to them. The present article explores this play of masked Englishmen and Englishmen with masks, examining the ways masks are used as narrative devices in a sample of contemporary texts – Marcel Schwob’s ‘MM. Burke et Hare, assassins’ (from the *Vies imaginaires*, 1896), Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustin* (1882), and Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901) – in order to mould and play with national distinctions, and to reflect upon the psychological state of the French subject.²

Mask murder

The primary stereotype evoked in Schwob’s ‘MM. Burke et Hare, Assassins’ is the landscape of fog and rain so often associated with the northern climate. This would have been familiar to the French reader from travel writing and cultural studies as well as from translations of British authors such as Dickens and Scott, and as such it brings with it an aura of factual accuracy that places the fantastical mask murders into a convincing framework. One typical interpretation of British climes is Fernand de Jupilles’s cultural analysis, *Au pays des brouillards (Mœurs britanniques)* (1886), in which the reader is encouraged to interpret fog and moral turpitude as inherently intertwined in British society, where ‘le brouillard qui couvre d’un voile et épais et nauséabond la capitale d’Albion est aussi favorable que possible aux attentats de toute sorte’ (1886: 4). This fog not only assists the machinations of a small criminal underworld, but predisposes the entire race to wrongdoing: ‘son climat humide et brumeux, [...] lui imprime une froideur de caractère exceptionnelle’ and creates individuals ‘qui sait torturer et prend plaisir à voir souffrir’ (7, 15). Whilst the anglophobia is palpable in the tone employed here – and not all contemporary texts write of Britain with such strong antipathy – it is no less inscribed in the logic of Darwin’s theoretical discourses on evolution which postulate that species adapt to their surroundings. The English, it follows, should be

the murky products of their murky climate. Like fog, their personality is obscure and hard to quantify; they dwell in a land where the natural mask of fog begs to be put to nefarious uses and blurs the lines between inherent criminal imperatives and individual criminal minds. Indeed, the shifting, concealing nature of fog and the metaphorical possibilities it offers nurture this correlation between the English and masks in fin-de-siècle literature.

In addition to the ostensible realism of the setting and the natural predisposition encouraged by the weather, Schwob's mask murder story appears as an embellishment upon real, historical crimes. 'MM. Burke et Hare, Assassins' is based on the famous case of William Burke and William Hare in impoverished Old Town Edinburgh of 1828, who set out as grave robbers before killing sixteen people and selling them for dissection to Dr. Knox, a morally unscrupulous anatomist. In Schwob's retelling of the tale, after an initial spate of murders by 'burking' – that is, manual smothering – the 'accessoire unique du théâtre de M. Burke' came into play (1896a: 272): a canvas mask lined with pitch that would be clamped upon the face of unsuspecting victims on a dark night, where the fog, half liquid, half solid, 'estompait les gestes du rôle' (273). A French newspaper reader could well believe this chilling degree of calculation and ruthlessness in the light of the clinical precision of Jack the Ripper (around 1888); the unsettlingly methodical British retribution for Cawnpore (from 1857); the cool-headed strategy of Kitchener during Fashoda (1898), and many other such manifestations of national sangfroid.

However, in spite of the realistic indicators of weather and historical fact, the mask in this story is a Schwobian addition to the genuine murder case, and the author introduces this imagined detail in his *vie imaginaire* along with a troubling thread of uncertainty – indeed, he goes to great lengths to ensure that readers cannot suspend their disbelief despite having established the ideal conditions for them to do so. This manoeuvre hinges around the image of the murder mask itself. First, the text is flooded with theatrical and fictional lexicon –

‘imagination’, ‘acteur’, ‘mimer’, ‘scène’, ‘costumes’, ‘drame’, ‘rêves’ – that relocates the real murders and the realistic climate into a world of performance where murder might be as much a theatrical artifice or a dreamed fantasy as a real crime. The narrative embraces the foggy ambiguity of the host nation, and turns certainty into uncertainty. Secondly, there is an unusual blurring of national categories here, in spite of the supposed uniqueness of each species adapted to its local milieu. Whilst most writers treat the Celtic nature of the Scot and Irishman and the Anglo-Saxon temperament of the Englishman as inherently separate,³ here Schwob wilfully disregards the clarity of those national divisions. Burke is at once the product of ‘la fantaisie féerique de l’île verte où il était né’; his dark genius correlates perfectly with the Old Edinburgh of Walter Scott’s Heart of Midlothian novels; and these blend with ‘son originalité anglo-saxonne’ to ‘tirer le parti le plus pratique de ses rôderies d’imagination de Celte’ (1896a: 267). Quite where he comes by that Anglo-Saxon nature is unclear, however, since he was born to an Irish cobbler before moving to Scotland. Whilst it is by no means unknown for England and Britain to be treated interchangeably in contemporaneous French texts on geography, politics, or economics,⁴ literary and ethnographic representations tend to make concerted efforts to distinguish between the romantic, Celtic spirit (seen as a positive attribute also present in France) from the banal, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon mind (that the French are eager to distance from themselves).⁵

Consequently, Schwob’s choice to mention each of the three nations but then purposely blur their distinctness is clearly a calculated decision, exacerbated by a baffling combination of racial analogies that compare Burke not to a poetic Fenian rebel, but to a ‘grand esclave noir’ and the Caliph Haroun-Al-Raschid from the *Mille et une Nuits* (267-68). Like the blank canvas of Burke’s murder mask, Schwob presents the reader with a British character *as mask* to be deciphered; it is never clear precisely what face Burke conceals, nor what face he presents in its place. Schwob implies that the British character so often used,

donned, and removed in contemporary literature and journalism is inherently a fantasy and an empty vessel. He opens up the possibility that, as Robert Ziegler contends, ‘with the donning and removal of disguises, the idea of a fixed identity is subverted’ (2002: 23). In the context of Burke’s murders, however, rather than mitigating the pain of loss as disguises do for the texts in Ziegler’s discussion, here they prefigure the awful (yet tantalizing) possibility of losing the self entirely.

Finally, unlike the bare wall revealed behind the masked portraits of ‘Le Roi au masque d’or’, the mask in the hands of the British murderer is itself made of ‘toile’ and presents a blank, featureless canvas. Furthermore, the pitch that fills the inside of the mask is black like a well of ink ready to be formed into words and imagery; rather than positively bearing potential for communication, a phonetic slippage between *poix* /pwa/ and *poids* /pwa/ in the text implies instead the weighty burden of elusive meaning. This evokes Schwob’s remark in ‘La Différence et la ressemblance’ that ‘[les signes] sont les masques de visages éternellement obscures. Comme les masques sont le signe qu’il y a des visages, les mots sont le signe qu’il y a des choses. Et ces choses sont le signe de l’incompréhensible’ (1896b: 235). Yet Burke’s mask with its blank canvas and lack of eye holes or facial features problematizes this: the mask does *not* metonymically signify the presence or existence of a face – even an obscured one – but rather the absolute voiding of the face. Consequently, pursuing Schwob’s analogy, if the mask does not signify a face, then perhaps words also fail to signify things. By using the mask to extinguish the individual beneath it, the blank canvas and black pitch of the mask conceal only the incomprehensible, a void where no faces, things, or signifiers exist to shield the individual from it. Schwob’s literature ‘nous livre du réel concentré. [...] La fiction éveille le réel. Elle féconde sa complexité’ (Jourde, 2008: 19); the narrative does not relieve the reader of the weighty burden of meaning. Aptly, this void is placed at the very end of Schwob’s collection of *vies imaginaires* – including no fewer than

ten ‘Anglo-Saxon’ characters (including medieval Anglo-French, Irish, and Anglo-Americans from before independence) – leaving the reader to grapple with the challenge of locating meaning; or, perhaps, the even greater challenge of lifting the mask and accepting its absence.

It is appropriate that this disquieting textual experience should be made manifest through a British character. The Anglo-Saxon appears as a contentious and often unsettling figure in contemporary French debates on race and nationhood, on ideals of political and educational standards, on language preservation, language learning, and philology.⁶ Some argue for closer parity, some for insuperable differences,⁷ but the fact that the debate even arises reflects that a shared history and quite possibly shared future characterize the nations on both sides of the Channel. The English and French are alike enough that in the medieval setting of Schwob’s ‘Les Faulx Visaiges’, the masked figures of the bandits teeter irresolubly between the two national identities. So close are the two nations in character that both the local English lord and the captured Alain Blanc-Bâton wear masks, and both seem to speak and understand English in spite of apparently being on opposing sides of the conflict. So, despite often vociferous attempts to objectify or denigrate the English, France’s neighbour and rival is no less a close relation who is too similar to be cast as other, but too different to be embraced as brother. English characters, as well as the masks they bear, may defy the reader’s desire to conceptualize and comprehend the boundaries of the self and to master signification.

The Actress’s Mask

In *La Faustin*, there are no real, physical masks; however, in a narrative milieu engrained in the theatre and performativity, the reader cannot divorce the spectacle of the stage from the activities of life beyond the theatre. Indeed, it is a paradox of the theatrical novel that, whilst

what occurs in the theatre is truthful in its admission that it is performance, the artifice that occurs off-stage is rarely owned but always present. It is with this veil of deception obscuring their view that readers must attempt to discern the true nature of the relationship between Juliette Faustin and her English lover Lord Annandale.

At first glance, Goncourt plays upon the stereotype of the stoic English gentleman riven with inner turmoil, familiar from the romantic heritage of pensive figures in country churchyards and wanderers upon the Lakeland fells who imagine remote, idealized, sometimes deceased women, but rarely seek out the mutual reciprocity of real relationships, which does not bode well for Juliette. Such stereotypes are blended with the tragic dramas associated in the French mind with Scotland (where Annandale's family have their aristocratic seat) after the roaring popularity of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels; appropriately, Lord Annandale's family do not use their wealth to live in the comfort of a London town house, but they roam the shadows of 'un château à l'état de ruine [...] qui faisait une habitation dans une forêt... et des verdure, des verdure pâles [...] secouées par de grands vents mélancoliques d'automne' (1903: 4–5).

Into this image, Goncourt feeds a note of not just coldness, but cruelty; Lord Annandale, for all his professed devotion, is remarkably inattentive to Juliette's loneliness and psychological suffering during their lovers' retreat and he does little to recognize or relieve her deepening melancholia. Indeed, he invites a string of unnerving English companions to visit them – his poor relative, a 'femelle britannique' with gorilla wrists (chapter 49); a fishing-obsessed English diplomat (chapter 50); and the alcoholic sadist George Selwyn (chapter 51). Far from this being a gesture to entertain Juliette during their endless tête-à-têtes, the figures he chooses seem selected to discomfort her, and he pays her feelings no regard during their sojourns. He is very much the heir to the French conception of an unempathetic race that inflicted barbarous cruelty on Joan of Arc, showed no clemency to

the unfortunate Mary Queen of Scots, and heartlessly oppressed Ireland for centuries.⁸ The Lord Annandale that emerges is, as Corinne Perrin notes of nineteenth-century English characters more widely, the product of ‘une épaisseur de textes préexistants et de discours constitués’ (2003: 10). Whether or not he is related to any scientific, referential reality is not particularly important; the cold façade presented here is a persuasive solidification of past texts and past performances.

However, the introduction of the lexicon of masking into this novel problematizes this initial reading of the English character as one from a stock of simple, face-value stereotypes. Goncourt associates masks with English nature and, moreover, does so in a critical chapter-long exegesis on the fundamental nature of English love (chapter 34). Here, rather than analysing the ways in which English lovers share their attachment physically, romantically, or domestically, the focus throughout is on deception and concealment. On one level, the English lover’s use of masking is metaphorical in the use of deceptive language: Goncourt remarks upon the inadequacy of the English language for allowing the mutual experience of genuine love and passion (‘l’Anglais n’a pas le vocabulaire d’amour’ (1903: 242)). Significantly, though, this goes further than a mere linguistic trait and the Englishman’s entire persona is obscured from the French viewer by ‘son masque de froideur et de spiritualité’ (245). The mask implies hidden depths; he conceals his thoughts and his psychology deliberately, refusing to make himself available to outside objectification and thus allowing him to subjugate his lover completely by forbidding her any glimpse ‘de ses pensées, de ses émotions, de son dedans intime’ (243). He presents a life-like mask that refuses the intimacy of facial expression and eye contact, blurring the lines between real face and artificial façade – this is reflected in the fact that Goncourt mentions a number of times the changing colour of Juliette’s eyes as her moods shift, but never ascribes an eye colour to William, thus impeding the reader from establishing a clear image. Evoking the mask here

encourages us to anticipate machinations and manipulations by Annandale in the chapters that follow.

Yet simultaneously, Annandale's apparent dominance is undermined by the structure of the novel and his position within the narrative. It is striking that Annandale, the object of all La Faustin's desires, only materializes about two-thirds of the way through the novel, begging the question of narrative priorities; indeed, his sudden arrival in a brusque apparition at La Faustin's bath-side feels like the jolting artifice of *deus ex machina*. La Faustin has, after all, just been told by her mentor that she needs to suffer horribly for love if she is to realise the supreme artistry of Phèdre, a role, as La Faustin observes, that Racine inscribed with an extraordinary demand for real-life suffering if the actress is to convey the torment of the heroine (191). Thus Annandale's arrival is established as a prerequisite of her *theatrical* narrative — a requirement dictated not only by her mentor one chapter before, but also by Racine and even Euripides centuries ago. So Annandale cannot be the simple embodiment of a pre-existing stereotype after all; were he the Romantic lover or the cold English aristocrat, he would be endowed with a level of subjective predominance and control that is conspicuously refused to him by the narrative framework. Instead, he is a passive receptacle in which the characteristics associated with those stereotypes remain latent. The aristocratic, reserved yet passionate, highly educated, melancholic, complex Annandale merely places a human mask over a storehouse of attributes and experiences that Juliette needs to portray true emotional suffering and attain real artistic genius; what she requires, to all intents and purposes, is the passion of the Byronic lover, the self-consciousness and moral guilt of Coleridge, the sorrows of Wordsworth, the nobility of spirit and demeanour of Scott's heroes. Since the embodiment of those emotions is an English aristocrat, an English aristocrat is what Juliette must have.

With this in mind, there are periodic hints that it is Juliette who, far from being a subjugated sufferer in their relationship, really machinates and manipulates the situation in their *drame intime*. She is described as having some traits of masculine subjectivity, gradually adopting those characteristics often associated with the romantic, aristocratic Englishman; for example, when she examines Annandale's physique 'avec quelque chose de l'admiration d'un homme pour une femme' (212). Additionally, after she draws attention to the masculine and feminine rhyme endings in Racine (193), we might note that in spite of the grammatical gender of the definite article, the stressed syllable terminating *La Faustin* is masculine, whereas the title *Annandale* (and indeed his family surname, *Rayne* – a homonymic nod perhaps to the inclement weather of Scotland) fall away with soft feminine endings. Indeed, like vague veil endowed upon female figures by Byron or Shelley, *La Faustin* states explicitly that she has no wish to remember the exact details of Annandale's property in Scotland which, as a member of the landed gentry, forms a fundamental aspect of his identity ('ce souvenir, je l'aime dans le vague, l'effacement' (4)); she experiences ecstasies of emotion on fearing him dead in India (from chapter 9 until his appearance) and during his actual death scene; and she refuses to satisfy his desires to make their relationship a concrete social reality by agreeing to become his wife and the mother of his children. It is Juliette who conjectures that there is an inner, complex man behind the 'masque de froideur', but then she elects to conceal any potential details of that inner man from herself.

Never is the mask-like nature of Annandale more evident than in the final chapters, when Juliette watches William's face as he expires in an '*agonie sardonique*' (340). Although the astonished (and delighted) doctor exclaims 'Non, ce n'est pas une illusion...' (339), the setting and lexicon offers the reader a picture of heightened theatricality, exacerbating the already dramatic tenor of the novel. Like in the description of Burke's spate of murders, theatrical vocabulary floods this chapter. The room is not a 'chambre' but a

subtly-punning 'pièce'. The reader is reminded obliquely that La Faustin is no comic actress but a *tragédienne*, the genre traditionally associated with masks. The doctor adjusts the lamp, spot-lighting not just Annandale in general but his face in particular, emphasizing the hyperbolic, grotesque qualities of his face, with its sardonic, satanic expressions akin to the Japanese masks surrounding Goncourt in his house at Auteuil.⁹ Indeed, William's death is described overtly as spectacle; the doctor warns Juliette that 'vous allez assister à un spectacle bien douloureux' and, the better to emphasise this, Goncourt repeats 'spectacle' in the present tense two pages later as William's death throes rise to a fever pitch (340, 341). As the final moments of William's life play out La Faustin masks her face with her hands, but when she uncovers her eyes she finds herself impelled to mimic William's death mask. Their two faces blend into a single facial expression, and as the reflection of William's distorted mask ripples across Juliette's own face, her perfect reproduction of his rictus suggests that the depth of character implied by the 'masque de froideur' never did reside with Annandale, but instead with Juliette. His Englishness is a set of free-floating characteristics, loosely grouped behind a mask; his presence is needed to bring these into the narrative, but after Juliette adopts them one by one she leaves the mask empty and Annandale voided of any substance.

Monsieur de Faux-Cas

The selective representation of English national characteristics as an instrument in the French character's concerns is still more emphatically associated with masks in Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas*. This novel ostensibly narrates the manipulation of a neurotic Frenchman, Jean de Fréneuse, by the twisted English lord and artist, Claudius Ethal. Ethal is described as belonging to an inherently cruel race, characterized not just by the *froidueur* of Lord Annandale but 'la froide *et cruelle* sensualité anglaise, la brutalité de la race et son goût de sang, son instinct d'oppression et sa lâcheté devant la faiblesse' (1901: 146 – my

emphasis). To lend specificity to this assertion, Lorrain aligns Ethal actively – as the epitomic product of his race – with the child abuse scandal revealed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*'s 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' (1884 – translated into French in book form as *Les Scandales de Londres* in 1885); Ethal represents the nation 'des sadiques et violeurs d'enfants, [...] ces puritains anglais aux faces congestionnées' (Lorrain, 1901: 146).

However, in spite of the narrator's unequivocally negative depiction of Ethal, the ambiguous narrative treatment of masks allows complexity to seep past the sheen of simplicity. It is striking that the obsession with masks is first associated with the Frenchman Fréneuse in this novel; before he meets Ethal, he is already drawn to masked balls (68), horrified by the mask-like faces of the people in the street (21–22), and haunted by dreams of the masked corpses of prostitutes (70). It is Fréneuse who muses that 'on devrait crever les yeux des portraits' – ostensibly, this is because he finds the eyes disconcerting, but it also seems to reflect an inescapable desire for the eye-less surfaces of ever more masks. Such a clear link between the French protagonist and masks is particularly worthy of note as it is in marked contrast to a number of Lorrain's other works: where the English and masks both feature in the same narrative, masks are generally distanced from French characters and associated with the murderous instincts of Englishman. In *Le Vice errant*, for example, masks filled with chloroform are used by English criminals to kill their victims, and again in *Sensations et souvenirs*, the recovering étheromane narrator recounts having watched through a hole in the wall of his hotel room as two suspiciously English-looking, blonde, bowler-hatted men argue, before one attempts to murder his drunken companion with 'un masque de verre, un masque hermétique sans yeux et sans bouche, [...] rempli jusqu'aux bords d'éther' (1895: 139).

The deliberate departure from the reader's expectations hints that the relationship between the Englishman and the Frenchman may be more complicated than it appears; this is

all the more so because it is, importantly, masks that bring and bind Fréneuse and Ethal together. Although Fréneuse goes to Ethal for spiritual healing for his obsession, he seems the very worst choice of doctor: seeking out an obsessive – who is still an obsessive – to cure an obsession is not the behaviour of man who really wants to be cured. One of Fréneuse's claims for Lord Ethal's credentials is that he has the special ability to differentiate between faces and masks in this world of blurred boundaries; Fréneuse writes that 'Lord Ethal voit aussi des masques; mieux, il dégage immédiatement le masque de tout visage humain' (1901: 80). But rather than removing masks from Fréneuse's world view, here 'dégager' implies 'draws out, draws attention to'; masks and reality become ever more indistinguishable, both for Fréneuse and for the reader.

Indeed, during the memorable soirée at the Hôtel de Sarlèze, Ethal not only shares his disturbed perception of human faces as masks concealing inner animals, but he is said to *impose* these perceptions upon Fréneuse; the latter claims that 'c'est cet Anglais qui les évoquait et les imposait à ma vision' (82). In the context of their discussion of masks, the choice of the verb 'imposer' is a significant one – even as they appear to be discussing the masks borne by the people around them, it evokes the image of Ethal aggressively imposing a mask *upon* Fréneuse, clamped over his face to intoxicate him, recalling the chloroform-filled murder weapon of Lorrain's 'Masques de Londres et d'ailleurs' (1901). From this moment on, Fréneuse acts as though he were sealed into this mask and he internalizes it psychologically. He seems to experience, as Lorrain suggests in 'L'un d'eux', 'l'impérieux besoin [...] de se grimer, de se déguiser, de changer leur identité, de cesser d'être ce qu'ils sont; en un mot, de s'évader d'eux-mêmes' (1900: 3). To the external observer, masks give the wearer the appearance of an object, dehumanizing and desubjectifying them and Fréneuse draws on this object position. By identifying himself with an objectified masked figure, he is able to distance himself from the perversions and psychological anxieties associated with his

own subjectivity, projecting his perversions outwards onto other characters. Ethal remarks that ‘nos vices [...], de nos visages font des masques’ (1901: 117) – for Fréneuse, the mask of vice does conceal his face and his nature, but it conceals it *from himself* rather than from those around him.

The presence of the English Ethal is essential to this process, as it provides Fréneuse with a way of repressing any knowledge that this psychological manoeuvre has taken place; Ethal, he assures us, is the typical English sadist – domineering, cruel, a familiar and therefore plausible type. Within the bounds of this stereotype, it would be very much in character for him to force Fréneuse to nourish unavowable desires. Fréneuse masks from himself and from the reader those impulses that come from within not from without. This displacement of responsibility for his perversions makes it possible, as Ziegler suggests, for Lorrain’s characters ‘to project themselves as spectacles for which they also serve as audience’ (1990: 29). Indeed, this is a novel with numerous English characters, and in each of them we might detect the projection of a repressed aspect of Fréneuse’s personality. There are the incestuous White siblings, who speak French in England and English in France, always foreign to their surroundings as Fréneuse feels foreign to his society and is foreign to his own self, internalized in their consanguine desires like Fréneuse is internalized in desiring the asexual, aestheticized image of himself in all his sexual liaisons. There is the frail Duchesse de Searley, whose ‘minceur d’une tige’ and ‘transparence d’un calice d’iris blanc’ (1901: 378) mirror Fréneuse’s own ‘face exsangue’ and ‘long corps fluet’ (2). Other generic Englishmen at the opium soirée fail to form cogent individuals, their descriptions never moving beyond the fragmentary state of ‘quelques habits de Londres, boutonnières fleuries d’orchidées, faces soigneusement rasées aux gras cheveux fluides et aux raies impeccables’ (160); they thus provide vestiges of the process of fragmentation so central to Fréneuse’s own psychological existence.

Notably, there are traces throughout Fréneuse's diary that his psyche must work hard to repress his awareness that these English figures represent fragments of himself much more than they exist in and of themselves. He writes after Ethal's party that the Whites, the Duchess of Althorneyshare, and the whole cohort of English opium takers had 'l'air bien plus de fantoches que de personnes réelles' (157), and later that the Duchesse de Searley is a 'créature irréal[e] [...] comme une apparition' (378). Furthermore, the sense that the English crowd at the party cross over interchangeably with Fréneuse is implied in the choice of a chiasmatic construction to ponder: 'qui veut-il [Ethal] mystifier demain, ces Anglais ou moi, moi ou ces Anglais?' (156). Perhaps this fragile state of constant denial is the reason for Fréneuse's horror at the large standing mirror in Ethal's studio with its garland of vacant masks (86) – there is a sense that Fréneuse is aware, subconsciously, that if his conception of Ethal were by chance to stand before the mirror, only the hollow image of a yet another mask would be reflected and his whole delusion would come crumbling traumatically down.

After Fréneuse has finally satisfied his persistent desire to kill by murdering Ethal, it is all the more apparent that he had masked the true nature of Ethal's significance to him. After a short burst of exalted subjective certainty, his internal disquiet re-emerges. Immediately after the murder, there is a flood of first-person personal pronouns and Fréneuse fills his diary with himself as subject whilst he reduces Ethal not only to the third-person, but to a dehumanized *ce*:

J'ai tué Ethal! Je ne pouvais plus! [...] J'ai tué. Je me suis délivré et j'ai délivré, car, en supprimant cet homme, j'ai la conscience d'en avoir sauvé d'autres! C'est un élément de corruption, c'est un germe de mort embusqué, une larve guetteuse aux mains d'ombre tenues vers tout ce qui était jeune, vers toutes les faiblesses et toutes les ignorances que j'ai anéanti. J'ai libéré Welcôme (cela, j'en suis sûr); j'ai sauvé peut-être cette douce marquise Eddy, dont il volait l'âme et tyrannisait l'agonie; j'ai peut-être rompu le charme affreux qu'il avait jeté sur la marquise de Beacoscome. Car cet homme était plus qu'un empoisonneur: c'était aussi un sorcier, et, en l'empoisonnant avec sa propre main, j'ai été un instrument inconscient et justicier du sort; j'ai été le bras levé par une volonté plus forte que ma propre volonté; j'ai achevé le geste dont il menaçait le monde, et j'ai accompli son destin. (372–73)

One page later, the exaltation has dissipated entirely: ‘les mots et les images se heurtent dans ma pauvre tête vide, où ballotte une chose douloureuse qui est mon cerveau liquéfié et meurtri; mes tempes bourdonnent’ (374). By overpowering the English sadist, Fréneuse temporarily, joyously, assimilates the other; but as that other was only ever a fragmentary projection of himself, he merely reassimilates those disquieting realms of his own psyche that he sought to displace and is forced, for a moment, to experience the anxiety and trauma of a confrontation with the id. Fréneuse’s identity here is not a question of the fixed boundaries of national characteristics that it at first appeared from the emphasis placed on the nationality of the cast of characters; rather, it is revealed as a fluctuating sea that must ebb and flow for its own tenuous survival.

The complex historical and cultural relationship between France and Britain combines with the multifaceted symbolic potential of the mask to create a unique formula for exploring the porous boundaries of the French self at the fin de siècle. Like the masks of indigenous American tribes for Lévi-Strauss, they are ‘comme les mots du langage, chacun ne contient pas en soi toute sa signification’ (1975: 102) – one can only seek to understand them in the wider cultural context, and they reveal more about the French society that created them than about the English men that they depict. In all of these texts, as Cédric de Guido argues for Schwob, ‘le masque devient le signe d’une terrifiante inversion des points de vues qui remet en cause les certitudes établies sur le vrai et le faux’ (2015: 291). The English character enhances the impact of this rewriting of points of view, bringing together two literary symbols riven with currents of concealment, fluctuation, and ambiguity. Terrifying this may be at times: the very idea of a cogent national – or even individual – identity becomes something of a spectre, lurking behind the English masks, recalling contemporary challenges to the French sense of truth and falsehood during the Dreyfus Affair, the struggle for Africa,

and the anarchism that shook the Third Republic. Yet this inversion of points of view may also be one of exciting opportunity; these Englishmen with their equivocal masks offer dense layers of symbolism that must be teased through by readers and puzzled over for meaning, providing an exercise in engaged reading that may help them work through the anxieties of modern life.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Jennifer Birkett on Lorrain's attraction to masks in her discussion of the perversions and obsessions associated with Decadence (1986: chapter 5); Robert Ziegler on the manifold tensions between vision and masking (2009: chapter 4); Will L. McLendon on *Monsieur de Phocas* at the intersection between literal masks and their metaphorical counterparts (masking in narrative structure, linguistic masks including pseudonyms, cosmetics and make up) (1978–79: 104–14); Leonard R. Koos on shifting names and genders among Lorrain's transvestite characters (1999: 198–214); and going beyond Lorrain, Cédric de Guido on the destabilizing effect of masks on point of view and perception of truth in Marcel Schwob, with an important discussion of masks and linguistic signification (2015: part III).

² There are a number of other texts that are pertinent to this discussion but that are excluded due to constraints of space, such as the medieval pillagers with their ambiguous Anglo-French identity in Schwob's 'Les Faulx-Visaiges' (1892) and the masked murders of Jean Lorrain's 'Masques de Londres et d'ailleurs' (1901), and on which I am working for another project.

³ To give one example, Mary Anne de Bovet, in her travel writing on Scotland, claims to be able to identify on sight the different nationalities of the members of the Highland Regiment: 'Bien qu'on voie, parmi eux de ces grands [...] Celtes calédoniens pur sang et fils des clans des Hautes-Terres, ces régiments comptent dans leur rangs plus de John Bull et de Paddy que de Donald' (1898: 25).

⁴ For example, the *Indicateur de l'exposition universelle* announced in November 1889 that the Ministre des travaux publics had decided to send an *ingénieur des ponts et chaussées* to the inauguration of the Forth rail bridge – in England.

⁵ Firmin Roz remarks in the preface to his tour of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales on the Celtic spirit fighting against England: 'le génie national survit à l'indépendance: il a résisté, lutté, imposé enfin, après des péripéties souvent douloureuses, toujours pathétiques, sa victoire aux mœurs, aux institutions et aux lois' (1905: I).

⁶ To give just one embattled pair of texts, see the contentiously entitled *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons?* (Demolins, 1897) and a passionate response, *Les Français sont-ils inférieurs aux Anglais?* (Crespion, 1898).

⁷ The Baron de Coubertin famously upheld the English public education system as a model for France in works such as *L'Éducation en Angleterre* (1888); whilst philologist Hippolyte Cocheris saw the two races as irreconcilable on a level well beyond the linguistic scope of his study: 'la lutte qui a existé pendant trois siècles entre l'anglais et le français n'est pas un combat de mots, mais un duel entre deux races: la race germanique d'un côté, la race néo-latine de l'autre' (1881: 126).

⁸ These remained popular topics in novels, children's illustrated stories, and dramas throughout the century, for example Joseph Fabre's patriotic *Jeanne d'Arc libératrice de la France* (1882), V. Canet's *Marie Stuart, la Reine martyre* (1888), Abbé Joubert's *Marie Stuart: tragédie en cinq actes et en vers* (1897), and Paul Féval père's *Les Libérateurs d'Irlande* (1846).

⁹ In Volume II of Edmond de Goncourt's *La Maison d'un artiste*, he describes his 'Cabinet d'Extrême Orient', filled with ivory figurines including 'sept masques d'hommes et de femmes ricanantes, dont les grimaces ressemblent à ces dépressions que les doigts obtiennent en s'enfonçant dans des têtes-joujoux en caoutchouc' (1881: 222).