Paul Fenniak, Psychosocial Realist

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Again and again we see isolated individuals in Paul Fenniak's paintings, and, as we track them over the years, increasingly disturbed, or at least nervous (and unnerving) individuals. *The Man with Short Hair*, the *Man with Teapot*, the *Woman on Sofa*, all 1999, seem rather placid if pensive, although there is a hint of anxiety in the man with the teapot. The fingers of his free hand press against the table, suggesting that something pressing is on his mind. That hand, in the middle of the diagonal formed by the teapot and the cup on the table, is fraught with tension, as its spreading fingers suggest. The space between them marks the black void of the table, just as the white cup signals the bare wall behind him. Trapped between these empty spaces, he is a solid gray presence, as the flesh of his hand and face confirm. The light and dark stripes of his sweater and the luminosity and shadow on his face suggest that he is at an emotional crossroads. What is on his mind? Fenniak invites us to speculate, drawing us into the picture — is the man pouring the tea for us, as the placement of the cup, which breaks the frame, suggests? — but we shall never know.

We seem to know a little more about the feelings of *The Guest*, the *Wandering Dinner Guest*, and the girl pictured in *Autumn Walk*, all 2000. The female guest sits rather tensely, as the zigzag of her body suggests, and stares suspiciously at something unseen by us, or perhaps at the torn wallpaper we also see, in what is obviously a rather plain, not to say tacky room, as the simple white table behind her suggests. She hasn't unpacked, and shadows swirl around her legs. Her black shoes contrast with her white collar, suggesting the extremes of emotion to which she is subject. The seat of her chair is white, one of its arms a stark black shadow. She herself is a rather somber, plain presence. The female dinner guest is also a study—a very eloquent, discreet study—of light and dark. A dark brick fence with white stone topping juts out at us—a marvel of illusionist space—while a dark brick fence with a white stone base marks the other boundary of the yard. Thin leafless trees and a puddle—abruptly divided into black and white planes—confirm its desolate, unkempt character. The woman somewhat anxiously clasps her hands, and looks beyond her confines. Her tight short dress—her knees are exposed—is also a bit confining. She has a voluptuous body—the curve of her belly is visible through her dress, and her breasts are full—but its ripeness seems lost on the world. She is a frustrated erotic presence, alone in the world—an imprisoned Danae, as it were, but with no golden Jupiter in sight. The yellowness of her dress is the only gold in her life.

The girl on her autumn walk doesn't even have that bit of hopeful light. Defiance and gloom compete in her face. She is aggressively sad, as though angry at her loneliness. She refuses to be resigned to her fate, epitomized by the bleakness of the autumn day. Her face is prematurely worn, like that of the dinner guest, and she

also gazes into empty space, projecting her needs and expectations into it. There is also a wall behind her, suggesting that she also is imprisoned, in herself as well as in the world. Both figures wander through life but are isolated in it.

The woman in *Glance*, 2001, shows us what the girl might be gazing at—a man, indifferent to her presence. Her arms are tensely crossed, and the space is once again empty, walled in, and anonymous. Strange as it may seem to say so, space is the real subject of Fenniak's picture, not only because he renders it with such illusionistic brilliance, but because of its power over the minds of the human beings who find themselves in it. *Glance* is about relational failure, which I think is the subtext of Fenniak's pictures, and the woman in *Escape from the Creeping Ultra-Violet*, also 2001, has completely given up on relationships. She yearns for no one. She is more obviously strange, emotionally, than the other women. Her face and figure seem to enact the tension Fenniak's other figures intimate. She seems to be a nurse or nun, as her headdress suggests, and she has accepted a loveless life. She's trim, tidy, and practical, and protected against whatever bad weather might come her way, as her raincoat, and the umbrella on the far wall, suggest—and also against the plane of sunshine that falls into her space. Again, her surroundings are plain, even bleak, and empty—as sterile as her life. The ascetic space is clearly part of her being. She is resigned to the fate Fenniak's other women—all his works are studies of the "other" in ourselves—resist.

It is worth noting that Fenniak's space is both continuous and discontinuous with that of the world outside the picture. The aggressive orthogonal lines suggest as much: they tend to march into the spectator's space even as they create the illusion of pictorial depth. It is this dialectic of space—the existence of an "inner" perspective (emblematic of inner life) co-extensive with "outer" perspective (emblematic of everyday life) yet informed by a different dynamic—that makes Fenniak's pictures tours de force of illusionistic construction. Their formal drama informs their human drama by embodying its tension.

The strangeness of human beings—indeed, of the human condition—is vividly evident in the somewhat surreal *Crime Scene*, 2000, and *Cemetery Vandals (Autumn Rite)*, 2001, with their oddly somnambulistic figures. The latter is an allegory of the five senses, like certain traditional works, and both are studies of human beings in different mental states. What began with the 1999 works climaxes in these group "portraits": the complete objectification of human subjectivity, indeed, a kind of catalogue of human types. In his 2000 and 2001 paintings Fenniak shows his uncanny ability to penetrate the individual human psyche. In the group scenes he shows his ability to codify individual and collective consciousness. Both kinds of pictures realize the traditional ideal of portraiture—to present an emotionally living presence—in modern terms. It is in fact a timeless ideal, and like the best realism Fenniak's pictures seem to have captured a bit of reality—all too human reality—for all time.

Fenniak's figures are not Titian's aristocrats nor Dürer's humanists nor Rembrandt's burghers, but ordinary people struggling to understand what life has done to them and make the best of it, even if that makes them criminals. He is a master of the psychological realism that has existed in secular North European painting from Dürer through Rembrandt to Degas and Max Beckmann, but his world is different. It is provincial, middle class, banal, and depressing, rather than cosmopolitan, ambitious, cultivated, and lively. It is a static rather than dynamic society, a dead-end rather than a vital world of opportunity. It is a place of living death rather than triumphant humanity. (This is why Fenniak's small world implodes in on itself in criminal activity. That alone can stir it from its fatalistic slumber.) But this difference shows us what a good realist can do: the best realism is not just about careful observation and descriptive nuance—in which Fenniak excels—but about discovery and insight. The best realism is not simply descriptive, however meticulous the description, but reflective - reflective on reality - and Fenniak's works are profoundly reflective. Indeed, they picture human beings beginning to reflect on their own reality, that is, becoming "realistic" about their fate - beginning to have insight into their own existences, the insight Fenniak already has. The best realism is not about accepting the common sense version of reality, but shows how strange and uncommon it is, inherently. It is about how unfamiliar yet universal feeling dwells in overly familiar people. It breaks our habits of seeing to make us really "see" even as it shows us what is ordinarily seen. It shows us that things are not as simple and obvious as they seem. Appearances are deceptive but also unsettling—clues to emotional truth as well as its disguise.

Fenniak shows us human beings slowly but surely becoming aware of the limits of their lives through their awareness of the limits of their surroundings. Their lives are circumscribed, as the dismal walls around them indicate. Fenniak's people recoil in dread from this recognition and self-recognition, from their dawning self-consciousness and acute consciousness of their physical environment: its emptiness, plainness, and smallness may be their own. Is the nothingness of the space they inhabit all that life has given them? Is it their unhappy fate? With brilliant insight, Fenniak depicts their emerging horror of life. He shows that self-discovery is contingent upon the discovery of the world's indifference to one's particular existence. He reveals the tragedy of human consciousness, the suffering that accompanies its growth, and that alone seems to make it possible. He shows the suffering that lurks under the veneer of everydayness and the frustration of everyday lives aspiring to be more than everyday. Thoreau famously said that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and Fenniak's modern Old Master paintings - they indicate that Old Master painting, with its human interest and responsible craft, is the new frontier - show us this desperation, vividly and intimately, and with empathic insight.