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A Search for a Form: Wilkie Collins's Early Fiction
Steve John Farmer

I

Wilkie Collins possessed a voracious appetite for controversy and a keen ability to create it among the literary circles of mid-nineteenth-century London. But until recently, Collins scholars searching for evidence of this tendency on Collins's part to fly in the face of convention have been content to note in some general fashion the rather overt sexuality that runs through several of his novels; or they call attention either to Collins's somewhat bohemian style of life or to the often provoking prefaces that he usually attached to the volume editions of his works. Of late, critics have begun to find that important evidence of Collins's impatience with convention lies in the pages of his major fiction, particularly *The Woman in White* (1859-60) and *The Moonstone* (1868). In *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers*, Sue Lonoff suggests that Collins's fiction reveals a "covert rebellion against popular opinion." She goes on to claim that this rebelliousness, "bound by convention" (16), creates in Collins's successful novels a complex and inconsistent attitude toward convention that is, ultimately, thematically crucial. U. C. Knoepfelmacher's "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*" posits an ambivalence on Collins's part toward convention, suggesting, in fact, that *The Woman in White*, one of Collins's two greatest novels, reveals its creator's interest in "an anarchic and asocial counterworld," a world that offered an appealing "alternative to the ordered, civilized world of conventional beliefs" (353). J. I. M. Stewart states forthrightly that Collins "lived . . . outside the ring-fence of Victorian convention" (9), that he "was a rebel—essentially aloof from popular feeling, and heartily hating and despising many of the central assumptions of Victorian society" (21). And William Marshall, in his *Wilkie Collins*, also suggests that Collins's works contain an ambivalence on the part of the author toward social normality. Marshall writes:

Despite the fact that nearly all the narratives conclude with the triumphant happiness of the virtuous, the line between good and evil in the world of Collins's novels is neither firm nor straight. . . . Whatever good may be (and for the most part, Collins does not make clear what

qualities it possesses), evil in the world of Collins' novels is far from absolute—it is a condition brought forth by time and circumstance, and it is occasionally mixed even with good. (122)

All these studies fail to consider the importance of the roots of Collins's disenchantment. Lonoff concludes with a detailed examination of how *The Moonstone* "questions a number of Victorian assumptions" (98). Knoepfmacher explores only Collins's disenchantment as it reveals itself in *The Woman in White*. And Marshall, unwilling to specify particular works, claims simply that Collins never consistently "repudiated the shams of the Victorian middle class, for which . . . he revealed such contempt" and that he "might have left a greater number of works marked by intellectual integrity" had he been consistent (25).

Surprisingly, the roots of the disenchantment are exposed not so much in the four novels of Collins's decade of apprenticeship—*Antonina* (1850), *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854), and *The Dead Secret* (1857)—as among the nearly one hundred short nonfictional reviews and articles written by Collins for the *Leader*, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round* between 1851 and 1863. Collins's nonfictional contributions to mid-Victorian weekly magazines—part of his literary background that has lain virtually unnoticed since being overshadowed by the successes of the 1860s—reveal, to a greater extent than his early fiction does, Collins seeking to become comfortable with the style of writing demanded by his mentors, attempting to instruct his audience, and ultimately becoming disenchanted with the entire process. My argument is that the beginnings of Collins's dissatisfaction with both social and literary convention—a disenchantment that Knoepfmacher sees in *The Woman in White*, that Lonoff claims exists in *The Moonstone*, and that also can be found to exist in the other novels of Collins's period of achievement—appear in the usually neglected periodical writing of the 1850s, a type of writing that absorbed Collins for the greater part of this crucial decade and that can be seen to have played a much larger role than is realized by most in the shaping of Collins, his career as a writer, and his aesthetic principles.

But the apprentice fiction does have a place in a study that ultimately will focus on Collins's nonfiction and its influence on Collins's major fiction, for it reveals, contrary to what most previous observers have argued, that Collins's approach to the art of novel-writing was initially haphazard and patternless enough to suggest that one might have to look away from the fiction and toward the nonfiction for evidence of a developing disenchantment on the author's part. So, before an exploration of the evidence in Collins's

nonfiction for the development of aesthetic principles that would appear in his successful fiction of the 1860s should come a picture of Collins as a writer of fiction in the 1850s. Such a view will help to explain the atmosphere that contributed to the frustration that appears in his major fiction and also show that the apprentice novels, and other, shorter, pieces of fiction, were not so much stepping stones to success as they were a young novelist's several distinct attempts at finding a successful formula for writing fiction. Thus, I will first outline the direction Collins scholarship has taken lately to show how most critics of Collins's apprentice works have searched for a pattern of development throughout the early fiction. Then, beginning with a discussion of Victorian preface-writing in general and Collins's preface-writing in particular, and moving on to a different view of Collins's apprentice fiction, I will argue that his apprenticeship, at least as far as his fiction is concerned, reveals no evidence that his disenchantment with convention was apparent in his early experiments with different types of fiction.

II

Most students of Wilkie Collins routinely divide his career as a writer into three distinct periods: the 1850s, his period of apprenticeship; the 1860s, his period of success; and the 1870s and 1880s, his period of decline.¹ But for over a century they have been compelled to operate within the even stricter limitations created by the incredible popular success of Collins's two masterpieces, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Because of the popularity of these two works, and because of the history of their composition and publication, most readers have studied Collins either as a figure instrumental in the development and growth of detective, mystery, and sensation fiction, or as a privileged and perhaps influential friend of Dickens, for whose weekly magazines and under whose tutelage the works were written. Rarely do Collins studies venture beyond these two works or the limits imposed by them, and bibliographical projects treating Collins bear out this point. Kirk Beetz, in his *Wilkie Collins: An Annotated Bibliography, 1889-1976*, offers evidence of the novels' popularity by listing a staggering sixty-plus editions each of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* that have appeared since Collins's death (36-49), and Robert Ashley, in *Victorian Fiction: A Second Guide to Research*, attests to the narrow boundaries of Collins scholarship by dividing most of the existing criticism into two distinct categories: Dickens/Collins influence studies, and examinations of Collins's role in early detective, mystery, sensation, and crime fiction (225-26).

Interest in the literary importance of most of Collins's other two dozen novels, novelettes, short story collections, and nonfiction

articles has always been quite limited; and the reason is apparent. Most of Collins's other works have, until the last decade, lain unread since 1900, when P. F. Collier published a thirty-volume—though incomplete—set of the works. As late as 1980, Andrew Gasson, in his "Wilkie Collins: A Collector's and Bibliographer's Challenge," wrote, "For most of Collins's titles, even the relatively modest target of a reading copy will be achieved only after considerable effort" (59-60). Collins himself seemed to anticipate the direction critical evaluation of his novels would take, for he gave instructions that the inscription on his gravestone in Kensal Green cemetery should read "In Memory of Wilkie Collins, Author of *The Woman in White* and Other Works of Fiction."²

Studies that do treat more than Collins's two major works are usually devoted primarily to the relationships that exist between the novels of one period of Collins's career and the novels of another. More often than not their focus is on the role played by the apprentice fiction in the development of a writer ultimately capable of creating such respected and successful works as *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*; such a defined rise and fall as Collins's seems to have intrigued scholars and often led them to search the period of apprenticeship for early evidence of seeds of success—seeds that would grow to bear fruit in the 1860s. Many of these studies—Kenneth Robinson's and Robert Ashley's early critical biographies of Collins, as well as H. J. W. Milley's and R. V. Andrew's early evaluative probes into Collins's career—offer primarily straightforward comparative examinations of the works of Collins's apprenticeship and the works of his period of success. For the most part, the only discussions of Collins's period of decline are those that either search for a gem among rough stones or try, briefly, to explain away altogether Collins's last several literary disappointments. Aside from the two major works, then, critics most often attend to the novels of Collins's apprenticeship, and, as will be noted, most students of these novels want to use them primarily to suggest a straightforward and teleological development from apprenticeship to achievement.

III

Most who examine the four early Collins novels have not viewed these novels as Collins's attempts to establish a form but rather as works which hindsight allows them to compare with *The Woman in White* and later popular successes; their eagerness to find in Collins's apprenticeship an uninterrupted progression from 1850 to 1860 blinds them to some of the real motives behind Collins's early experiments in fiction. As they explore the early works for patterns, they usually try also to rank the four apprentice novels, hoping to show, for example,

that *Antonina* least resembles *The Woman in White*, that *Basil* shows slight improvement, that *Hide and Seek* shows a marked advance, and that *The Dead Secret* represents the last plateau before greatness. Some of the following comments reveal this understandable but misleading tendency to set these early pieces up against Collins's major works.

Antonina, Collins's first novel, is a rather transparent imitation of a Bulwer Lytton historical romance that, as Kenneth Robinson notes, "bears little resemblance to anything else [Collins] wrote and is today almost unreadable" (54). Still, for those concerned primarily with finding some connection between Collins's early and later novels, *Antonina* certainly offers some interesting material. Robert Ashley suggests the following:

Although it would have been impossible to foretell from *Antonina* Collins's future brilliance, nevertheless the familiar Collins trademarks are visible: the well-conceived . . . plot, the device of character contrast, the creation of atmosphere, the descriptive skill, the social criticism . . . the typical character types . . . the favorite themes and motifs. . . . (28).

Among N. P. Davis's disparaging remarks about *Antonina* is this: "For his theme he had the audacity to choose no less an event than the fall of the Roman Empire. It was a subject that his education had left him singularly ill-prepared to treat" (43). But Davis, too, claims that patterns found in the novel are patterns that would be "used again and again until . . . his creative imagination finally left the ground and he produced mature works" (43). Here Davis must be referring to certain types of character or incident which we see for the first time in *Antonina* but which would become trademarks of Collins's later fiction. For instance, the crudely drawn and beastly Giosvintha, the villainess in Collins's first novel, is also the prototypical Collins Jezebel, who would reappear, much more carefully drawn, as Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale*, as Magdalen Vanstone, to a degree, in *No Name*, and as Madame Fontaine in *Jezebel's Daughter*. Dorothy Sayers's comments about Collins's first novel are similar: "In *Antonina* . . . we have our first glimpse of Wilkie Collins the plot-maker. It is not particularly impressive and suggests no great originality, but . . . we may notice a certain economy of incident and care . . . characteristic of the mature Collins" (68). William Marshall calls the novel "undistinguished" but recognizes its complex plot, a characteristic of all of Collins's great works (30). Walter de la Mare writes, "A touch here and there in this almost unreadable romance may hint at the author of *The Woman in White*, but only a critical seer could have foretold the later novels after reading *Antonina*" (54). From these comments might come the

impression that Collins was searching for *The Woman in White* in 1850, not that he was interested in finding a type of fiction with which he could be comfortable.

Of Collins's next novel, these critics and biographers have similar points to make. Keeping with the theme of progress toward the successes of the 1860s, Ashley writes of *Basil*, "In his second novel . . . Collins took a tremendous stride from *Antonina* in the direction of his best and most characteristic work" (32). More specifically, Ashley comments on the use of multiple narrative in *Basil*, a technique which would, when perfected and elaborately used in novels of the sixties, contribute to Collins's success (35). Robinson's comments concerning *Basil* are similar: "In many respects *Basil* marks a great advance, particularly in the creation of atmosphere and the description of scene" (71). Sayers echoes these sentiments: "*Basil* is a young man's book, crammed with errors and crudities, but it is a book that no one, looking for promise of future excellence, could disregard" (87). She goes on to suggest that "it marks a steady progress toward achievement in the direction of plot and character construction . . ." (92). And R. V. Andrew is rather straightforward in his evaluation of the work as a link in the chain that would be complete upon the publication of *The Woman in White*. He writes, "The plot is simple and straightforward, and Collins still has to write several novels before he is equipped to tackle *The Woman in White*" (37). These comments all reveal that the major critical interest in Collins's second novel is for some the economical plotting and the first appearance of the multiple narrative with which Collins was to accomplish so much in his two greatest works. Others focus on the character types—the master criminal, Mannion, or the prosaic but industrious hero, for instance—who would reappear in the successes of the sixties. And in that regard, the comments all suggest that *Basil* is only valuable when it can be made—forced, in some instances—to shine light on the novels of the sixties; they fail to show that the novel might shine light on Collins and the motivation behind his hit-and-miss search throughout the fifties for a type of fiction that would suit him.

Evaluations of *Hide and Seek* also lean toward discussions of the novel as a link in the chain connecting Collins's early efforts to *The Woman in White*, and not as a work which stands by itself as an attempt by a young writer to find himself. R. V. Andrew is probably the most overt in his view of the novel as a piece to be judged primarily by the merits of the successes of the sixties. He calls the book "Collins's best attempt yet at a mystery" and writes of the first years of Collins's apprenticeship, "Collins's progress has been steady. Item by item he equips himself for the *tour de force* on which his fame is to rest" (47-49). H. J. W. Milley, whose dissertation, "The Achievement of Wilkie

Collins and His Influence on Dickens and Trollope," documents five major themes and three major character-types with which Collins experimented in his apprentice fiction and which contributed to the success of the novels of the 1860s, suggests that *Hide and Seek* is an "advance" from the first two novels only in that it contains threads of themes that would play major roles in the novels of what he calls Collins's "period of achievement."³ And Swinburne also suggests that Collins's early novel is in some way dependent on the later, more successful ones when he writes, "nor would *Hide and Seek*, though a most ingenious and amusing story, have had much chances of a life as long as it deserves if it had been the best that its teller had to tell" (Hyder 210). So, it is apparent that most important to the critics of *Hide and Seek* is that in it the element of mystery which illuminates Collins's most popular works appears for the first time. As the woodsman Matthew Marksman unravels the mystery of Mary Grice's identity through the last half of the novel, most choose to see only the elements of mystery and detection—Milley calls it the "hide and seek" theme (9)—employed in much the same way it would be through most of Collins's successful works of the sixties.

The Dead Secret, Collins's final apprentice novel, labors under the same burden as the earlier novels: most critics steadfastly refuse to separate it entirely from the novels—*The Woman in White* in particular—which would follow it. Ashley, ranking the novels, maintains "*The Dead Secret* is on the whole the best of the early novels. Its significance is twofold: first, in the portrait of Sarah Leeson there is evidence of a profounder note of characterisation, and, second, for the first time Collins had subordinated everything to mystery" (53-54). The idea of mystery is one which Milley also focuses on in his discussion of the novel. He contends that the elements of mystery in *The Dead Secret*, though they were generally treated rather harshly by reviewers for being inconsequential to the plot, were elements observed and treated by Collins with much greater care when he wrote *The Woman in White* less than three years later (120). R. V. Andrew, as he notes scenic descriptions and character types found in *The Dead Secret*, several times suggests that the novel does "present certain features which constitute an improvement in technique," that it "brings Collins nearer his aim," and that much that is present in it "is to become of great importance in *The Woman in White* and subsequent novels" (85-94). And Robinson claims of *The Dead Secret* that it "can best be described as a tentative move in the direction of the sensation novel, that department of fiction of which Wilkie Collins was soon to become the best known exponent" (110-11). Again, then, the elements of mystery and sensation are virtually the only components noticed by the critics of this last novel of Collins's apprenticeship. All strongly imply that Collins was almost consciously working toward a yet-unwritten novel.

Aside from his first four novels, Collins wrote a good deal of other fiction throughout the 1850s. Most of these pieces he wrote for the mid-Victorian family and literary magazines to which he contributed throughout the decade, among them *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Fraser's Magazine*, the *National Magazine*, and, of course, Dickens's *Household Words*.⁴ And several of his favorites he collected and republished in two separate volumes at the middle and toward the end of the decade.⁵ Most of the stories are little read today, and, as with the apprentice novels, even the best known titles are treated by critics, those who attend to them at all, as important only insofar as they might throw light on Collins's methodological progression from apprentice writer of fiction to renowned author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Andrew goes so far as to claim that the short-story writing of the 1850s was helpful to Collins to the extent that "had he continued to develop his skill as a story-teller . . . and had he devoted his energies to this aspect of his art while his powers were still developing and before ill-health claimed him, he might well have written more novels of the quality of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*" (77).

Among the more frequently mentioned stories, primarily because of their length, are *Mr. Wray's Cash Box* and *A Rogue's Life*. The former, a sugary Christmas tale fashioned after Dickens's, was published in one volume by Bentley in December, 1851. Ashley notes both the discouraging and the significant aspects of *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* when he writes:

The least characteristic and probably the least successful of all Collins's fiction, it was quickly and deservedly forgotten. Yet the novelette has twofold significance in Collins's development as an artist: it indicates that Dickens is replacing Bulwer as his literary inspiration and that he is continuing to turn from the romance of the past to the romance of the present. (31).

Similarly, Marshall notes in this work "of slight intrinsic merit" that,

subjects and techniques which became familiar in Collins' later fiction are apparent here: the lack of action and mobility, the use of dreams, the concern with shock and alternating psychological states, types such as the country squire and the parson, and art used as a symbol of identity. (41)

Both comments reveal a need on the part of the writers to have even minor works fit neatly into the Collins chronology, a chronology that they hope demonstrates Collins's growth as an artist through the 1850s.

A Rogue's Life, a light and rather loosely constructed tale of the adventures of Frank Softly, a warmhearted rascal, was published over a five-week period in *Household Words* in early 1856. In it Knoepfmacher sees roots of the amorality that were to become apparent in *The Woman in White*. He suggests that Collins's "markedly sympathetic treatment of the villains" (361) in *A Rogue's Life* would become a trademark in his later career, particularly the respected novels of the 1860s. Milley discusses the story only because he sees that the criminal Dr. Dulcifer is a prototypical Count Fosco and that certain aspects of the setting, namely the "lonely, old-fashioned, red brick building, surrounded by high walls,"⁶ (100) prefigure the eerie Blackwater Park of *The Woman in White* and the sinister Sanatorium in *Armadale* (Milley 36).

Of the other, shorter, stories of the 1850s, Collins considered the six that he collected and published together under the title *After Dark* in 1856 and the ten he put together in *The Queen of Hearts* in 1859 to be the best. Of course, these stories, since they were Collins's favorites and most of them first appeared in Dickens's *Household Words*,⁷ have commanded more critical commentary than much of the other short apprentice fiction. But, nevertheless, the critics have an eye only for the sixties. In "Gabriel's Marriage" (1853), for example, Marshall, looking toward Collins's period of success, sees "a significant improvement in the control of materials and the penetration of a character's state of mind" (41). In "The Dream Woman" (1855), he sees Collins employing the theme of fatality in a way that is similar to his treatment of the subject in *Armadale* ten years later. Milley claims that "A Plot in Private Life" (1858) "is on the road that leads to *The Moonstone*" (7), and Andrew echoes him by seeing in the same story "a pointer to [Collins's] special gifts which were to lead to the writing of *The Moonstone*" (109-10). Milley also suggests that "The Diary of Anne Rodway" (1856) "reveals, when stripped of its sentimentality, a situation which Collins employs in his best work" (18). And Andrew sees in "A Paradoxical Experience" (1858) a story easily dismissed with the exception of a leading character, Fauntleroy, who becomes Fosco in 1860 (119).

Even from these brief comments concerning some of the short stories Collins wrote through the 1850s comes the sense that critics view the first decade of Collins's career without ever losing sight of the works of the sixties; instead of assessing the works of Collins's apprenticeship as individual works in the hope of marking significant differences or similarities, critics too often compare them only to the successful works and, thus, fail to see crucial elements of Collins's apprenticeship in their own light. These attempts at ranking the early fiction fail to consider that the novels and short stories, far from being automatically comparable, and far from displaying only evidence of future talent, represent, primarily, Collins's early experiments with

several quite different types of fiction: an historical romance; a lurid potboiler set in modern London; a novel of detection with strong Dickensian influence; and a novel of mystery, much like those he would write in the sixties. It is a mistake to assume, as many critics obviously do, simply that Collins eventually developed enough to be able to create the novels he wrote in the 1860s. Also to be considered is this: by the time he took up his pen to write *The Woman in White* he had abandoned forms which he believed had failed him, had adopted techniques which had succeeded, and, most importantly, had discovered, not only through his early fiction but through his career as a journalist as well, a genre within which he could comfortably write but with which he had already become rather disenchanted. Another look at some of the early fiction will show this to be the case. First, though, should come a brief look at the Victorian practice of preface writing, for some of Collins's early prefaces supplement the fiction in revealing his experimentation, through the 1850s, with his aesthetic principles.

IV

Anyone who endeavors to examine the tremendous influence of the mid-Victorian novel on the expanding reading class of the day knows how full of vitality, how carefully cultivated, and how precarious the relationship between writers and readers often was. Most writers scrupulously, and with a courtesy difficult to imagine today, responded without hesitation to letters they received from their audiences, often answering quite straightforwardly a stranger's inquiries about their novels, their work habits, or their artistic goals.⁸ They truly valued their readers and must have been pleased by the votes of confidence which the correspondence seemed to be. But the writers must also have felt a certain uneasiness with the lack of distance they kept between themselves and their eager and insistent audience.

Sue Lonoff describes the closeness of the relationship, writing that "while the Victorian novelist regarded his public as a kind of extended family, the Victorian reader conceived of the writer as a friend or acquaintance to whom he could appeal" (10). The metaphors used here are fairly common ones, but they do not reveal the often tentative and sometimes uneasy nature of the relationships. Most of the novelists, though absolutely convinced of the validity and the responsibility of their mission to provide lessons to their readers on how to live, had also to bear in mind that these readers—the general public as well as the professional reviewers of literature⁹—could often make demands that impinged on the artists' beliefs and aesthetic principles. Occasionally, a Victorian author would carefully, and perhaps against

his better judgment, defer to his readers' desires. Even Dickens was persuaded to make the ending of *Great Expectations* "more acceptable through alteration" (Dexter III, 226). And the usually aloof Trollope claims, in his autobiography, to have killed off Mrs. Proudie after overhearing two readers discussing her—and her creator—disparagingly (275).

But the Victorian novelists, though they did usually attempt to accommodate their readers, also often felt a compulsion to prove to themselves and those who read their works that they could stand their ground firmly when the artistic balance of the novels was challenged by the suggestions of outsiders. In some instances, a writer would simply turn a deaf ear to his readers and their comments about his works; Dickens's refusals, despite an uproar from his British and American readers, to spare the lives of Little Nell and Paul Dombey, are two cases in point. More often than not, however, novelists would acknowledge their readers' suggestions or complaints, and answer them pointedly, in prefaces, which became quite popular and almost ubiquitous during the middle decades of the century. Since most novels were serialized, the novelists usually attached their prefaces to the first complete volume-form edition of a work, which almost always preceded by a few weeks or followed closely on the heels of the last serial number.¹⁰ The prefaces were, in essence, a novelist's first chance to address issues he had witnessed being bandied about by readers throughout his work's serial run. For example, Dickens, who once argued with Collins against the use of a prefatory letter addressed to readers "on the ground that a book (of all things) should speak for and explain itself" (Dexter II, 436), used a preface in the first volume edition of *Bleak House* (1853) both to deny, with vehemence, that he had misrepresented the length of certain Chancery cases and to defend the plausibility of Krook's spontaneous combustion. Thackeray used the first volume edition of his *Pendennis* (1850) to complain in a preface that "Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art" (34). He was weary of a society, he wrote, that allowed "no writer of fiction among us . . . to depict to his utmost power a Man" (34). Elizabeth Gaskell included a preface in the first volume edition of her *North and South* (1855) to explain to her readers that she felt serialization had hurt her novel, indeed that she had "found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended and . . . was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close."¹¹ And, though her first published novel was not serialized, Charlotte Brontë used a preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847) to defend her novel against "a timorous or carping few" who had questioned the propriety of Jane's relationship with Rochester (35).

Though suspicious of his readers' values, Wilkie Collins nonetheless seems to have thrived in this oxymoronic atmosphere of trustful uncertainty between writer and reader. Arguably the most outspoken and almost certainly the most dedicated preface writer among Victorian novelists—Robinson tells us he was "addicted to preface-writing" (68)—Collins did not often miss an opportunity to begin a volume edition of a work with an examination of some aspect of the writer/reader relationship. His prefaces, usually quite forceful in tone—Lonoff uses the words "belligerent" (29)—took the form of admonitions on some occasions, explanations of textual matters on other. In his preface to *Basil*, for example, Collins angrily takes to task those reviewers who have questioned the propriety of his book:

"Basil" was the second work of fiction which I produced. On its appearance, it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy, as distinguished from false—I allowed the prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt. (7-8).

Sometimes his prefaces grew into what have since been recognized as valuable statements of Collins's aesthetic principles.¹² And always, by their very presence, they proclaimed Collins's keen awareness of his readers' presence. As Robinson puts it, Collins, through his prefaces, "is assuring [the reader] of the author's friendly interest in him, an interest which he modestly hopes will be reciprocated" (69). But the prefaces also reveal a young writer quite prepared to change aesthetic directions if the need, or the desire, arose. In other words, Collins's prefaces suggest, in much the same way that his apprentice novels will be shown to do, an initially haphazard approach on his part to the world of fiction.¹³

The prefaces to his early fiction show a young writer serving notice to readers he knew very little about, readers he was to refer to as the "unknown public" in 1858,¹⁴ that he was striving diligently and forthrightly to lay some of the groundwork for what he believed could be a productive career as a novelist. His belief in himself stemmed at least in part from the relatively surprising success—Page terms it "an extraordinary triumph" (6)—of his first novel, *Antonina*. In these prefaces, he admits flaws and asks his audience to understand certain of his idiosyncrasies. He exudes confidence in these pieces, but there is

also a sense that he has yet to feel entirely comfortable with his ability to create important fiction.

For his first, and only historical, novel, *Antonina*, Collins created a preface designed primarily to explain to his readers his beliefs about the necessity of verisimilitude in an historical romance. But he also devoted a good deal of space to an explanation of what he calls the "arithmetical symmetry" of his novel, and throughout this explanation it becomes evident that Collins wished to make clear to his readers exactly what he believed fiction, his in particular, should do for those who read it. In an attempt to explain certain of his artistic motives, he writes:

. . . it was thought that different passages in the story might be most forcibly contrasted one with another, that each scene, while it preserved its separate interest to the mind of the reader, might most clearly appear to be combining to form one complete whole; that, in the painter's phrase, the "effects" might thus be best "massed," and the "lights and shadows" most harmoniously "balanced" and "discriminated." (Barnett 145)

Here we see Collins the conscious artist already much concerned about an artistic principle of balance and juxtaposition that demands the successful creation and combination of imagery. With his next novel, *Basil*, Collins's preliminary remarks suggest that he has become attracted by a different notion of what fiction is:

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotion which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader's belief in the probability of my story by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith. Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with—when there was a good object in using them—as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all. By appealing to genuine sources of interest *within* the reader's own experience I could certainly gain his attention to begin with; but it would be only by appealing to other sources (as genuine in their

way) *beyond* his own experience that I could hope to fix his interest and excite his suspense, to occupy his deeper feelings, or to stir his nobler thoughts. (5)

Unlike in his preface to *Antonina*, here we can see Collins's interest in drama, an interest that he held in common with Dickens, that led Dickens to make his acquaintance in 1851, and that would always be a huge part of his life and writing.¹⁵ We can also see a shift in interest, away from a concern for imagery and toward one for plot and verisimilitude. Collins had known Dickens for less than a year when he wrote *Basil* and its preface, and, though the novel does not reflect the Dickensian influence that his next novels would, the frank "Dedication" suggests that Collins had been compelled by suggestions from his mentor to think carefully through a philosophy that might guide his career.¹⁶ Yet in his "Preface to the Revised Edition" of *Hide and Seek*, Collins reveals newly discovered interests when he discusses both the importance of "delineation of character" in a work of fiction and the necessity of careful revision:

My project of revisal has . . . been carefully and rigidly executed. I have abridged, and in many cases omitted, several passages in the first edition, which made larger demands upon the reader's patience than I should now think it desirable to venture on if I were writing a new book. (4)

And in the "Preface to *After Dark*" (1856), Collins moves in still another direction by revealing that the idea of a "frame-work" for his collection of six short stories, most of which he had written for *Household Words*, is the structural pattern, the creative technique that is, at the moment, intriguing to him. He writes, "I have taken some pains to string together the various stories contained in this Volume on a single thread of interest, which, so far as I know, has at least the merit of not having been used before" (5). It is clear from this statement that more important to Collins than the individual stories that make up *After Dark* is the fact that he has created and experimented with a new narrative device.

Indeed, then, Collins's early prefaces, as they show the young author constantly and consciously attempting to move forward as a writer of popular fiction, provide clues that Collins was aware of and valued the attention of his readers, who allowed him a forum in which to explain his own creative principles. The prefaces also suggest, though, that with each new work he discovered and experimented with various conventions of fiction. But more valuable than the

prefaces in revealing Collins's early attempts at defining his literary goals are the early novels themselves.

As I have pointed out, several critics have attempted to show that Collins progressed from the weak *Antonina* to the strong *The Dead Secret* in his journey from apprentice novelist to creator of *The Woman in White*; they do not recognize that more important than systematically noting textual similarities between *Antonina* and Collins's major efforts is understanding that, after *Antonina*, Collins never again attempted to write another novel like his first. Despite the success of *Antonina*—Collins remembered fifteen years after its publication that it “was received by the critical authorities with such a chorus of praise as has never been sung over me since” (Ashley 29)—Collins chose to abandon the historical romance, leave behind the influence of Gibbon and Bulwer Lytton, among others, and forge ahead to different types of fiction. Even praise from such established and respected magazines as the *Athenaeum*, which pronounced the work “a richly-coloured impassioned story” (Page 40), and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which called the novel a “profound study . . . with deep philosophic views” (Page 43), could not persuade Collins to delve further into what H. F. Chorley calls “antique fiction” (40). *Antonina* had, as Collins noted, “opened to me a career as a novelist” (Ashley 29), and the genre was one with which Collins's “glorious Walter Scott (King, Emperor, President, and God Almighty of novelists)” (Lonoff 5) had been tremendously successful, so to many it is puzzling that Collins abandoned a form that seemed to hold for him a great deal of promise. Avrom Fleishman's rather prosaic solution is a suggestion that most Victorian novelists, perhaps because of the intriguing popularity of the genre, “felt called upon to attempt the historical novel” at least once but almost always abandoned the form after one usually unsatisfactory try (36). Just as feasible a solution is that Collins, whose early prefaces, as we have seen, show him to have been a confident, almost boisterous young writer, and whose confidence had to have been bolstered by the reviewers' praise for his first novel, decided never to return to the form simply because he wanted to explore other types of fiction, types which perhaps would prove more lucrative, types which might present a greater challenge for him. We know today that once he found the type of fiction with which he became comfortable—the sensation/mystery novel—he stayed with it through much of the rest of his career; in the preface to his first post-*The Woman in White* novel, *No Name*, he suggests that he has finally become satisfied with a certain distinct type of fiction: “I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already” (6). Whatever his reasons for leaving his first success behind, Collins shifted in 1852 to an entirely new form of fiction.

With *Basil*, the story of a young man's ill-fated love for a beautiful young woman and his duel to the death with her seducer, Collins decided to forego the historical novel and create, instead, a melodrama set in modern England. Though critics have noted similarities between this second effort and Collins's later successes, *Basil* marks for Collins less a progression toward the sixties than an experimental shift in position from one form to another. The lurid and, to many Victorian critics, overdrawn scenes of sexual seduction and violence in the pages of *Basil* represent a departure for Collins from the somewhat tamer *Antonina*. Of *Basil*, a reviewer for *Bentley's Miscellany* wrote, "the intense everywhere predominates" (Page 46). *Basil's* dreadful discovery of the infidelities of his wife, Margaret Sherwin, for example, is, for mid-Victorian literature, quite surprisingly suggestive:

I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices—*her* voice, and *his* voice. I *heard* and I *knew*—knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror. (216-17)

And in his initial triumph over Mannion, his wife's seducer, the violence is unsettlingly brutal:

I . . . hurled him, with the whole impetus of the raging strength that was let loose in me, face downwards, on to the stones.

In the mad triumph of that moment, I had already stooped towards him, as he lay, insensible beneath me, to lift him again, and beat out of him, on the granite, not the life only, but the semblance of humanity as well. (222)

The audience to whom he had decided to appeal in *Basil* were the middle-class readers who had remained through the thirties and forties eager for and unintimidated by the burgeoning phenomenon, the Newgate novel. And though the vogue was pretty well finished by 1852, these readers were willing consumers of what Collins dubbed in "The Unknown Public" the "penny-novel-journals" or "pennurths" (*Household Words* 18 August 21, 1858: 218), which contained "a combination of fierce melodrama and meek domestic sentiment" as well as "short dialogues and paragraphs on the French pattern . . ." (219, 220).¹⁷ They were also, to a certain extent, the readers at whom *Household Words*, whose thoroughly middle-class philosophy must have been occupying a great amount of Collins's attention by late 1852, was directed.¹⁸

Just as Dickens recognized that the hardworking English wanted to be able to read primarily for the sake of entertainment,¹⁹ Collins must have believed that more compelling, more realistic, and more approachable entertainment could be lifted from the crowded streets of modern London, where Basil is first struck by Margaret's beauty, and the remote reaches of Cornwall, where the deadly duel between villain and hero concludes, than could be transferred from the dusty pages of history books. Realism was a key to Collins—he made a point of discussing it in several of his novels' prefaces—despite some of the rather ludicrous predicaments into which he places many of his characters in many of his works. In other words, with *Basil* Collins made more than a tentative move toward discovering and securing the lower middle-class audience whose potential would intrigue him throughout the 1850s and who would become his without question by the time *The Woman in White* finished its run in the pages of *Household Words* in August 1860. But the fact that he would set the rest of his novels against a nineteenth-century background and focus on the value of fiction as entertainment does not suggest that Collins settled into a routine after writing *Basil*. His third novel would show that he was still experimenting with fiction in a hit-and-miss fashion.

Hide and Seek is the story of the unraveling of the mystery of the deaf and dumb Mary Grice's true identity by her long-lost brother, Matthew Marksman. It, too, represents less a progress than a shift in form; in it Collins seems still to be looking for and coming to terms with an appropriate form. His first novel had been an historical romance; he left the form behind for sensational melodrama. The third novel suggests another shift, this time away from the lurid strains of *Basil* toward a more straightforward and less florid and impassioned form of writing. Put simply, by his third novel Collins was beginning to calm down as a writer. The calming factor was, to a great extent, Dickens, whose influence must certainly have been becoming a force in Collins's life by 1854. *Hide and Seek* is the first full-length work in which Collins shows the influence of his mentor. Ashley writes of it: "not only in humorous incident and eccentric characterisation, but also in style is the Dickens influence manifest. The style of *Hide and Seek* is lighter, warmer, more flexible, less austere and matter of fact than the previous Collins style. Time after time one can detect evidence of a conscious imitation of Dickens" (37). Norman Page echoes Ashley: "*Hide and Seek* . . . shows the influence of Dickens, to whom it is dedicated; the theme of the child of unknown parentage may well have been owed to the recent example of *Bleak House*" (8). And Andrew calls the novel "Collins's personal *David Copperfield*" (41). In particular, Dickens's influence is apparent in some of the eccentric minor (for the most part) characters who festoon the pages of the novel and whose

descendants would become an appealing aspect of Collins's major fiction. Mr. Jubber, the less-than-honest proprietor of Mr. Jubber's circus, itself influenced by Sleary's traveling circus of *Hard Times*, seems not far removed from, though perhaps a bit more garish than, Mr. Bounderby:

From this doorway there now appeared Mr. Jubber himself, clothed in white trowsers with a gold stripes, and a green jacket with military epaulettes. He had big, bold eyes, a dyed moustache, great fat, flabby cheeks, long hair parted in the middle, a turned down collar with a rose-coloured handkerchief; and was, in every respect, the most atrocious looking stage vagabond, that ever painted a blackguard face. (79)

And the portrait of "Bishop" Vance, a middle-aged manservant who oversees the Rectory at Rubbleford, is truly Dickensian both in terms of attention to detail and tone:

"Bishop" Vance, as the small wits of Rubbleford call him, in allusion to his sleek and solemn appearance, his respectable manner, his clerical cravat, and his speckless black garments, is placing the cake and cowslip wine on the dining-table, with as much formality and precision as if his master expected an archbishop to lunch, instead of a clown's wife and a little child of ten years old. It is quite a sight to see Vance retiring and looking at the general effect of each knife and fork as he lays it down; or solemnly strutting about the room, with a spotless napkin waving gently in his hand; or patronisingly confronting the pretty housemaid at the door, and taking plates and dishes from her with the air of a kitchen Sultan who can never afford to lose his dignity for a moment in the presence of the female slaves. (98)

Hide and Seek, then, is the first full-length work in which is apparent the influence of Collins's relationship with Dickens. *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box*, of course, had revealed Collins's talents as an imitator of Dickens, and some of the other early pieces of short fiction were Dickensian enough in construction to convince Dickens that Collins possessed the talent and organizational skills to collaborate with him on some of his own pieces.²⁰ But not until *Hide and Seek* does the Dickens influence become significant.²¹

His next major work, *The Dead Secret*, was to show not only the influence of his mentor but the influence of the people at whom

Dickens had long aimed much of his philosophy. Collins's fourth apprentice novel, *The Dead Secret*, is important in a number of ways. Though many critics seem to go out of their way to see it as a last plateau of early achievement before the tremendous successes of the 1860s, the novel can also be read as a last distinct experiment with form before *The Woman in White*. Unlike the first three novels, *The Dead Secret* was serialized—in *Household Words*. Collins, who had been a paid member of the *Household Words* staff since 1856, and a contributor of articles and short fiction since 1852, must have congratulated himself on the decision—probably his or Dickens's—to serialize, for, with his penchant for suspense, serialization was soon to make him his fortune. That he manages to maintain for hundreds of pages his readers' interest in a secret that, as Robinson claims, "does not remain for long a secret" (111) is a tribute to the practice of serialization, which gave Collins his first opportunity to hone narrative skills that are the foundation of his famous "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait" formula. That the novel was one of only three ever serialized in *Household Words*²² also suggests that Dickens—always less than adventurous when it came to entrusting his readership to the pens of others—had become satisfied with Collins's progress. *The Dead Secret* also represents the first time Collins revealed a real interest in extended characterization—a facet of his fiction about which he was quite sensitive. The attention to detail that he shows in his portrait of the confused and feeble-minded Sarah Leeson, as well as in his eccentric and misanthropic hermit, Andrew Treverton—character types hitherto used only to supply works with minor comic elements—reveals in Collins a new interest in three-dimensional detailed characterization.

The element of sophisticated and developed sensation and detective fiction also make their first appearance in *The Dead Secret*. The pair of heroes, Rosamond Treverton/Frankland and her blind husband, Leonard, together play the role of detective and spend much of the book slowly but inexorably closing in on the terrible secret—Rosamond's illegitimacy—hidden, in the form of a confessional letter, in one of the abandoned rooms of Porthgenna Towers. The extended account of a pair of intelligent yet rather prosaic heroes, who rely on powers of deduction to solve mysteries, appears for the first time in *The Dead Secret* but would reappear, in polished form, in *The Woman in White*, as the adventures of Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright. This device would, in fact, appear, in one way or another, in all the novels of the sixties, as well as in many of Collins's less approachable later works; one can speculate that Collins learned early and never forgot that most of his readers could readily warm to an unprofessional, and thus fallible, but human solver of mysteries, one like themselves.

But more significant than Collins's apparent experimentation with various fictional devices he would employ in his major works is that with *The Dead Secret* he had finally found the appropriate vehicle for his fiction. As Marshall notes, "the action [of *The Dead Secret*] conforms to the moral demands that the readers of *Household Words* might make upon it" (37). Marshall is accurately suggesting here that Collins had, after three rather distinct experiments, found his niche, and found also that the constraints placed upon him by this niche—*Household Words* and Dickens's rather middle-class audience—were constraints that influenced his fiction in positive fashion, at least to the extent that he stayed with what he had discovered through four respected novels of the 1860s. No longer would Collins experiment with different forms of fiction; the novels of the sixties would, instead, reflect his mastery of the skills introduced in *The Dead Secret*.

But the major novels of the 1860s would also reflect a new and darker side of Collins and the formula for success that his connection with Dickens and Dickens's first weekly magazine had led him to discover. These novels would begin to reflect, overtly enough for Knoepfelmacher to pronounce Collins "anarchic" and "nihilistic" (368-69), Collins's disenchantment with the stagnant middle-class literary conventions through which he had searched by the 1860s. The question that arises concerns the source of this disenchantment. Certainly the different types of fiction of the 1850s allow for speculation concerning Collins's dissatisfaction; the constant experimentation, the movement from one type of fiction to another, could itself be viewed as evidence of a writer uncomfortable with convention. But, as I have suggested, since there is no ostensible development through Collins's early fiction of this disillusionment, the student of Collins must look for it somewhere else. And the nonfictional fruits of Collins's career as a journalist offer more solid evidence of the roots this alienation. In fact, the growth of his disillusionment, which Collins subsequently expressed, subtly though with some frequency, throughout the major works of the 1860s, can be sensed in many of Collins's nonfictional contributions to certain mid-Victorian weekly magazines. So, before turning to the fiction of the 1860s and an examination of Collins's unconventional attitudes, we must review Collins's career as a journalist, as well as several of his contributions to journalism.

NOTES

¹ Even a glance through the tables of contents of a few biographies of Collins shows how biographers have come to view Collins's career. The last three chapters of Ashley's *Wilkie Collins* are "Journeyman Novelist," "Master Craftsman," and "Novelist Emeritus." Robinson, in his *Wilkie Collins*, devotes a chapter to "Literary Beginnings," four—one each—to the novels of the sixties, and one to Collins's slide "Downhill." William Marshall, in his *Wilkie Collins*, examines "The Early Works," "The Major Novels," and "Uneven Shadows."

² Collins was touchy about *The Woman in White* and its role in his career. In a letter to a publisher of his novel *Man and Wife* concerning the layout of the title page of the work, he comments on the shadow cast over his later works by his first huge success: ". . . the printing of *The Woman in White* in one type, and of my other, and later novels in another—is establishing comparisons between my books—and depreciating two of them, at the expense of one. Either keep *The Woman in White* . . . by itself, and add 'etc., etc.,' or let *Armadale* and *The Moonstone* have the same honours in type, as *The Woman in White*. I have no preference for either plan—by all means adopt which you like best yourselves. But don't let us encourage the public . . . in its one everlasting cry to me: 'Ah! He may write what he pleases! He will never do anything again like *The Woman in White*' (Coleman 140).

³ According to Milley, the "Dead-Alive" theme, the "Hide and Seek" theme, the theme of fatality, the "Social Outcast" theme, and the "Sinister House" theme all begin to appear in Collins's fiction, short and long, as early as 1850 and eventually become themes central to all of Collins's major novels of 1860s. And the three major character types—the Master Criminal, the "Jezebel Woman," and the Physically or Mentally Infirm Characters—also move often through the early fiction to become mainstays, indeed, often key figures, in the novels of the period of success (2-39).

⁴ Once he met Dickens, Collins was quite a faithful supplier of fiction for *Household Words*. Only four of Collins's earliest stories were published in *Bentley's Miscellany*. They are "A Pictorial Tour of St. George Bosherville" (January 1851), "Twin Sisters" (March 1851), "A Passage in the Life of Perugino Potts" (February 1852), and "Nine O'clock" (August 1852). Only one, "Uncle George or the Family Mystery" (May 1857), was published in the *National Magazine*. Another,

"Brother Griffith's Story of Mad Monkton" (November and December 1855), was published in *Fraser's Magazine*. Two stories, "The Siege of the Black Cottage" (February 1857), and "A Marriage Tragedy" (February 1858), he sent to the American *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, which he would save with his *Armadale* in 1864. The rest, more than a dozen of the stories written in the 1850s, appeared in *Household Words*. His stories average seven thousand words, though some are a bit longer, and at least two—*Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* (1851) and *A Rogue's Life* (1856)—are long enough to be considered novelettes. Not until the 1870s would Collins, as Andrew writes, "palm [less successful stories] off on *The Seaside Library* or other publications of the same type" (109).

⁵ *After Dark* was published in two volumes in February, 1856 and contained six short stories with "Leaves from Leah's Diary" as connecting narrative. *The Queen of Hearts* was published in three volumes in 1859 and contained ten short stories, also with connecting narrative.

⁶ Wilkie Collins, *A Rogue's Life* (New York: P. F. Collier, 1900), p. 100. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Collins's fiction will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

⁷ Of the fifteen stories collected in *After Dark* and *The Queen of Hearts*, ten were originally published in *Household Words*.

⁸ Collins was one novelist who frequently corresponded with inquisitive readers. His open letter "How I Write my Books" published in the *Globe* in 1887, is a direct response to a reader who had written to ask how he had conceived *The Woman in White*. The letter, as well as others like it, is today considered a valuable reflection of Collins's own thoughts on the writing of fiction.

⁹ Lonoff, using the same distinctions employed by Collins in his aggressive preface to *Armadale*, divides Collins's audience into "readers in Particular" and "Readers in General." Readers in Particular were primarily the reviewers with whom Collins battled for most of his career as a novelist. The Readers in General were the general public.

¹⁰ Whether a novel was published in volume form before or after its completion as a serial depended both on the industriousness of its author and on its popularity. The writer had, of course, to have finished with his product in time to publish it before its serialized conclusion; and the novel's serial run had also to have been interesting

enough to compel readers to forego waiting for the weekly or monthly version to finish its run.

¹¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Dorothy Collin (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1979), p. 31. Gaskell's spat with Dickens over the publication of *North and South* in *Household Words* is well known. When the novel began to slow the sales of *Household Words*, Dickens began to insist on holding down the number of pages that appeared each week. Dickens's editorial excisions did not sit well with Gaskell, whose tone in the preface to the book's first volume edition reflects her unhappiness.

¹² Collins's "Letter of Dedication" to *Basil* is often looked to for evidence of the young novelist's developing aesthetic principles.

¹³ On one occasion, though, in his "Preface to the Revised Edition" of *Hide and Seek*, he unabashedly appeals to readers "to compare this novel [*Hide and Seek*][—]especially in reference to the conception and delineation of character[—]with the two novels ('Antonina' and 'Basil') which preceded it; and then to decide whether my third attempt in fiction, with all its faults, was, or was not, an advance in Art on my earlier efforts" (5). It seems here as if he is inviting his readers to view his fiction in a teleological way, but Collins might actually be asking them to read his latest work in contrast to the others, to examine it on its own merit.

¹⁴ Wilkie Collins's article "The Unknown Public" was published in *Household Words* on August 21, 1858. In the article he laments the fact that over three million British readers are reading a corrupt, lurid literature.

¹⁵ Through Augustus Egg, Dickens met Collins and invited him to play a role in a production of Bulwer Lytton's comedy *Not So Bad as We Seem* that eventually was performed at Devonshire Terrace in the presence of the Queen on May 16, 1851. Collins and Dickens would perform on stage together many more times over the course of the decade.

¹⁶ Dickens, as he did with many young writers in whose works he recognized promise, wrote to Collins, on December 20, 1852, to express his opinions about *Basil*, as well as his opinions on Collins's skills as a novelist: "I have read the book with very great interest, and with a very through conviction that you have a call to this same art of fiction. I think the probabilities here and there require a little more respect than

you are disposed to show them. . . . But the story contains admirable writing, and many clear evidences of a very delicate discrimination of character" (Dexter II, 435-36). Dickens's opinions suggest that he is counseling his student on the right course to take to make a go of writing as a career.

¹⁷ All subsequent passages taken from *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, or the *Leader* will be identified within the text by appropriate bibliographical information. The bibliographical information for the quoted articles will also appear in the "Works Cited" section at the end of the study.

¹⁸ Collins would not know his audience as thoroughly as he wanted to until he became firmly established as a journalist, an occupation that paid his bills throughout the 1850s. I discuss the Victorian middle class in greater detail in the second chapter.

¹⁹ Dickens wrote the following to Charles Knight: "The English are, so far as I know, the hardest-working people on whom the sun shines. Be content if, in their wretched intervals of pleasure, they read for amusement and do no worse. They are born at the oar, and they live and die at it. Good God, what would we have of them!" (Dexter II, 548).

²⁰ Most of Collins's collaborations with Dickens took place in the various Christmas numbers of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. With the Christmas numbers Dickens would usually develop a theme and farm out to several trusted contributors the various chapters of what would, for the most part, amount to one number and a half—thirty-six pages—of his regular weekly magazine. The pieces were Dickens's to the extent that he always provided at least the introductory chapter of these numbers. In *Household Words* Collins contributed to "The Seven Poor Travellers" in 1854; "The Holly-Tree Inn" in 1855; "The Wreck of the Golden Mary" in 1856; "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" in 1857; and "A House to Let" in 1858. In *All the Year Round* he contributed to "The Haunted House" in 1859; "A Message from the Sea" in 1860; "Tom Tiddler's Ground" in 1861; and "No Thoroughfare" in 1867. The extent of his actual collaboration with Dickens on these various projects is a much-debated topic. Among the most convincing studies of the authorship of Dickens' Christmas Stories is Deborah Thomas's "Contributors to the Christmas numbers of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, 1850-1867," in the *Dickensian* 69 (September 1973): 163-72 and the *Dickensian* 70 (January 1974): 21-29.

²¹ Dickens certainly saw something in Collins that he liked, something that perhaps reminded him of himself in the late thirties. He wrote of *Hide and Seek* to his sister-in-law: "Neither you nor Catherine did justice to Collins's book. I think it far away the cleverest novel I have ever seen written by a new hand. It is in some respects masterly. Valentine Blyth is as original, and as well done, as anything can be. The scene where he shows his pictures is full of an admirable humor. Old Mat is admirably done. In short, I call it a very remarkable book, and have been very much surprised by its great merit" (Dexter II, 570).

²² The two other *Household Words* serial novels were Dickens's own *Hard Times* (1854) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854).

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Dead Secrets Solved: William Clarke's
*The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*¹
 Robert Ashley

Wilkie Collins' friends all knew that he had achieved the remarkable feat of simultaneously and more or less harmoniously keeping two mistresses. Gossip in Gloucester Place and Wimpole Street, the decision not to allow his burial in Westminster Abbey because of the scandalous nature of his private life, J. G. Millais' lurid tale of Wilkie's rescuing from a poker-brandishing villain a beautiful woman whose "subsequent history is not for these pages,"² Thomas Seccombe's tantalizing reference to "intimacies" in *The Dictionary of National Biography*,³ and Kate Dickens Collins Perugini's skeleton-in-the-closet revelation that Wilkie had a mistress named Caroline, who left him to marry another man⁴ somewhat enlarged the scope of this real-life mystery without coming close to solving it. Facts began to emerge when Clyde K. Hyder published a 1939 article in *PMLA*.⁵ The two mistresses were Caroline Elizabeth Graves and Martha Rudd, who were bequeathed equal shares in Collins' will. Mrs. Graves was frequently listed in London directories at the same address as Collins; she had a daughter, Harriet, who married Wilkie's lawyer, Henry Powell Bartley. Martha Rudd, however, was kept in a "separate establishment"; she bore Collins' three children, all given the name of Dawson. Caroline tended Wilkie's grave until her death in 1895 and was buried beside him; ownership of the grave then passed to Martha. Next, Kenneth Robinson discovered that Caroline had married a Joseph Charles Clow in 1868, but returned to Wilkie two years later as Mrs. George Graves, however, not as Mrs. Joseph Clow. Later, Robinson discovered the identity but not the whereabouts of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.⁶ Otherwise, absolutely no trace remained of the subsequent fate of the Bartleys and the Dawsons. Until the appearance of Clarke's book.

Fortunately for himself and all Collinsians, William Clarke married Faith Elizabeth Dawson, Wilkie's great-granddaughter and the granddaughter of Wilkie's only son. Both Clarkes attended the Wilkie Collins conference organized by Professor Reginald Terry at the University of Victoria in British Columbia on the hundredth anniversary of the novelist's death. On the second evening of the conference, Mrs. Clarke proposed a toast to Collins, except for whom, she remarked, none of the conferees would be present and of course neither would she.

For obvious reasons, the Dawsons had been reluctant over the years to identify themselves. But the time had obviously come to end this secrecy, and the two Clarkes persuaded Wilkie's descendants to do so. Aside from Faith, two grandchildren and a great-grandson were still alive, and they provided Clarke "with memories, photographs and lots of their time."⁷ Two descendants of Caroline Graves were also discovered to be alive. As a result of Clarke's indefatigable efforts, a more or less clear picture began to emerge. Clarke does not attempt literary criticism; in view of all that has been written about Collins recently, there is no need for him to do so. His book is not, he says, "a full, rounded biography covering an assessment of Collins as a writer: rather a simple account of Collins, the man, and the women in his life."⁸ There is a good deal in the biography about the Collins-Dickens relationship, but this review will emphasize the story of the *menage à trois* and of Caroline's descendants, which constitutes Clarke's unique contribution to Collins scholarship. And a fascinating contribution it is.

Clarke is inclined to accept Millais' account of the melodramatic meeting of Wilkie and Caroline, however much Millais may have romanticized it. Caroline was not, as she liked to claim and as Millais also claimed, a gentlewoman in the Victorian sense of the term, nor was her husband an army captain of independent means. She was plain, though not in appearance, Elizabeth Compton, the 1830 daughter of a carpenter, and he was George Robert Graves, an accountant's clerk and (like Dickens) a shorthand writer. They were married in 1850, Elizabeth Harriet was born in 1851, and George died in 1852. Caroline was obviously in a somewhat vulnerable position, an attractive woman in her early twenties saddled with an infant daughter, a tempting target for Millais' poker-brandishing villain or some one like him. According to a paper read at the Victoria conference, Caroline until "rescued" by Wilkie survived by keeping a shop. At any rate, Wilkie and Caroline began sharing the same house, but there is evidence that he had earlier set her up in "a separate establishment." By the time they moved into rooms in Harley Street, Wilkie was listing Caroline in the census returns as his wife and disguising her daughter as Harriet Montague, a sixteen-year-old servant, though she was only ten at the time.

At this point, complication in the person of Martha Rudd reared its not very ugly head during Wilkie's 1864 trip to Norfolk in search of atmosphere for *Armadale*. Collins's grandchildren believe they met at a pub or hotel in Yarmouth, where Martha may have worked. Born in 1845, she was the daughter of Mary and James Rudd, a shepherd, thus considerably lower on the social ladder than Caroline—Mary was

illiterate, having signed Martha's birth certificate with a cross. Clarke surmises that Martha's "dark good looks" were "striking enough to catch Wilkie's trained eye."⁹ Photographs in Clarke's book don't substantiate a claim to "dark good looks." But Caroline doesn't appear as a ravishing beauty either, so it may very well be that hideous Victorian clothes and hair styles, to say nothing of the primitive state of nineteenth-century photography, fail to do justice to either woman. Furthermore, temperament more than good looks could have been the source of Martha's appeal; in addition to being several years younger than Caroline, she had a "frank openness" and a "straightforward honesty"¹⁰ in striking contrast to the older woman's occasionally annoying pretensions to gentility. Whatever the reason, Martha lingered sufficiently in Wilkie's consciousness to lure him back to Yarmouth, and by late 1867 or 1868 she had moved to London.

This account of the Rudd-Collins relationship differs from that offered by Laurence Ince in *The Wilkie Collins Society Journal* for 1986. Taking his cue from Seccombe's statement in the DNB that "intimacies formed as a young man led to his being harrassed after he became famous, in a manner which proved to be very prejudicial to his peace of mind"¹¹ and Collins' claim on the first page of the "Letter of Dedication" to *Basil* (1852) that he had "founded the main event out of which this story springs, on face within my own knowledge," Ince theorizes that Collins first met Martha, daughter of a linendraper (like Margaret Sherwin of the novel) in the early 1850s but did not consummate the relationship because such a liaison would have compromised his still not established career. Ince had discovered that a Thomas Rudd kept a linendraper's show in London, and he states, without citing any authority, that Martha Elizabeth Rudd was born around 1830, making her about the same age as both Margaret Sherwin and Caroline Graves.¹² However, Ince's suppositions clash with Martha's birth certificate as well as the convictions of all her descendants. Since the certificate is dated 1845, Martha could have been at most seven years old when *Basil* was published.

In recreating Caroline's background, Ince also disagrees somewhat with Clarke. Clarke states, "She was apparently christened Elizabeth Compton, and was probably born in 1830 and brought up in Toddington, a small village six or seven miles north-east of Cheltenham"¹³; Ince identifies the date of 1834 and the place as Bath. Actually Clarke admits the possibility of the later date: although some London documents "establish her year of birth as 1830 (or the second half of 1829)," others deduct four or five years from her age."¹⁴ In the absence of either a birth or baptism certificate for Caroline, there is no way of reconciling these discrepancies. The fact that Caroline was christened Elizabeth also creates a problem. Ince theorizes that she

adopted the name Caroline when she went to live with Collins. He goes on to say, "Certainly there appears to have been an attempt to cover up her early life [there is no doubt of this], for her daughter, when she married in 1878, was convinced that she had been born in around [sic] 1854 and not as the certificates testify in 1851."¹⁵ For the transformation of Elizabeth into Caroline Elizabeth, Clarke has no explanation; he merely puts parentheses around Caroline in the family tree.¹⁶

At any rate, Wilkie was now involved in one of the most amazingly complicated domestic arrangements in literary history: Caroline, her mother-in-law, and her daughter in one establishment; Martha and a soon-to-emerge morganatic family in another. As Clarke says, "One can only marvel at his stamina in keeping two women reasonably content, living an intense social life . . . and working remarkably hard at his chosen profession."¹⁷ But the "other woman" situation can hardly have been much to Caroline's liking, and she apparently delivered an ultimatum: either Wilkie would make her an honest woman or she would marry a possibly more financially secure, and certainly a younger, man. However, Ince believes that Collins actually proposed marriage, but was rebuffed. At any rate, on October 29, 1868, Caroline married one Joseph Charles Clow, eleven years her junior, in the presence of Wilkie himself and with one of his closest friends, Dr. Frank Beard, as one of the two witnesses. Early speculation assumed that Clow might have been a craftsman employed during some repairs or alterations on Collins' home. But Clarke, citing the church register, identifies him as the son of Joseph Clow, "a fairly well-to-do distiller in Avenue Road, just across from Regents Park."¹⁸ Ince suggests alternate parentage:

An examination of directories for the late 1860s tells us a slightly different story. Joseph Charles Clow was the son of Leonard Clow, who kept the Western Counties Hotel at the corner of London Street and Whitfield Street. Here Clow operated as an agent for Dublin stout, ale, and whisky [sic].¹⁹

At least, both possible fathers had alcoholic jobs. Whosever son he was, Joseph Charles vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as he emerged; obviously he had been a bad investment for Caroline. Within two years Caroline was back in Wilkie's home, but this time to play a reduced role. Ten years earlier, the census had listed her as Collins' wife; in 1871, she appears as a widow, housekeeper, and domestic servant and as Caroline Graves, not Caroline Clow. Clarke assumes that she was no longer Wilkie's mistress, a role now reserved exclusively for Martha. But she was certainly more than a mere

housekeeper and domestic servant; she was the female head of the house. For years she had been the center of Collins' social life, a life which collapsed around him when she left. This undoubtedly explains why, possibly in addition to some sense of obligation and kindness, Wilkie was willing, perhaps eager, to welcome her back, especially since Martha was ill-fitted to assume Caroline's role. Now life went on as it had earlier. Except for one significant difference.

On July 4, Martha presented Wilkie with a daughter, Marian (named after Marian Halcombe?). This blessed event forced the creation of a non-literary fiction: Wilkie Collins, novelist, became William Dawson, barrister; Martha Rudd, spinster, became Martha Dawson, wife and mother; the three children were Dawsons, not Collines. Whether Collins ever seriously considered matrimony seems unlikely since he "had grown to despise marriage, and the effect marriage had on his closest friends."²⁰ Though "Martha always insisted to her family that she could have married Wilkie, anytime she wished,"²¹ he never took the step taken by his hero Basil, that is, marry a young woman so far beneath him in the social scale. As it turned out, the Dawsons would have fared much better if he had. For Martha, even a morganatic arrangement with a famous novelist was a pretty good deal for a poor, unsophisticated, uneducated country girl. For Wilkie, he was having his cake and eating it too: entertaining his friends at Gloucester Place without any of the complications of sex and Caroline's pesterings about matrimony and at Bolsover Street (later Taunton Place) enjoying a sexually satisfying relationship with an even-tempered and undemanding mistress as well as a growing family of whom he was obviously fond. This was the way it was to be for the rest of Wilkie's life. Consequently, we can leapfrog to Wilkie's death and to Clarke's unique contribution to Collins scholarship, i.e., what happened to the survivors in Gloucester Place and Taunton Place and to their descendants.

Before proceeding to that sad story, one juicy tidbit deserves mention: Wilkie had a small collection of "feelthy pictures" provided by his New York photographer friend Sarony, one of which Sue Lonoff exhibited at the Victoria conference. Clarke tells an amusing anecdote of how an actress friend, one of many "women of talent and personality from the artistic, literary and theatrical worlds" with whom he "carried on a teasing correspondence,"²² filched one picture of a gauzily clad damsel.

In drawing up his will, Collins hoped to secure the future of his two women and, to some extent, that of their children. Both Caroline and Martha received two hundred pounds and half the income from his estate of roughly ten thousand pounds. For the children, however,

he made a clear distinction: Caroline's daughter, Harriet, was to inherit her mother's share for her lifetime, but afterwards everything would go to the Dawsons. This made eminent sense, since Harriet's lawyer husband should have been able to provide for his family. Somewhat surprisingly, in view of his novels' crusades for women's rights, Collins' will was typically Victorian: after Martha's death, only the son, William, was to inherit a capital sum; the two daughters, Marian and Harriet, merely received income for their lifetime. Presumably, the girls would get husbands who would assure their future, but their illegitimacy might make this difficult. Unfortunately, nothing worked out as Collins had planned.

For obvious reasons, Caroline was the most immediately affected by Wilkie's death. Her entire *raison d'être* had disappeared; also she could not afford to maintain the large house in Wimpole Street, into which she and Wilkie had recently settled. So she moved; the fact that she died in lodgings above a cabinetmaker's shop shows how far her fortunes had declined by 1895. Her daughter, Harriet, suffered the consequences of a disastrous marriage; Harriet's husband, Henry Bartley, turned out to be thoroughly a bad lot. Not only did he squander Caroline's half of Wilkie's estate, but he deserted his wife and four young daughters to live with another woman in a pub near the Thames, leaving his family dependent on the charity of their in-laws. When he died in 1897, still a young man in his early thirties, after nine agonizing months of cancer, he was destitute. The outlook became even bleaker in 1900 when his mother died, putting an end to the allowance granted to Harriet and her four surviving daughters (a fifth had died in 1888, barely two months old). Fortunately, the girls all inherited their mother's and grandmother's good looks, especially the oldest, Doris, whose photograph, unlike those of Caroline and Martha, substantiates her claim to genuine beauty—Victorian photography as well as feminine styles had obviously improved in the interim. In addition to beauty, Doris had talent, poise, and personality and at the age of twenty was embarked on a glamorous, though financially precarious, theatrical career. With the stage name Doris Beresford, she toured in musicals and comedies, on at least one occasion playing the lead role, and eventually joined the famous company at the Gaiety Theatre, soon becoming a featured actress as well as a much sought-after model. The "Gaiety Girls" were remarkably successful in attracting titled husbands. Doris had at least one aristocratic suitor, but turned him down because of a long-lasting liaison with Louis Bishop, whom she met on tour. She eventually married Ivo Locke, a mining engineer; her career ebbed and flowed, but she was usually hard up.

The other three girls followed their older sister's example and enjoyed moderately successful stage careers. But their private lives, like

those of their mother and grandmother, were star-crossed. Cecile married George Gregson, an actor, had two children, was deserted, then died young of cancer. Evelyn, taking the stage name Eve Bevington, married Geoffrey Wonder, a cousin of a well-known actor-manager, who left her to emigrate to Australia. "For a time she was comforted in remarkable luxury" by Percy Arthur, manager of a theatre in Hammersmith, who had made a fortune during the Alaskan gold rush. After his death, she "met an attractive Frenchman, had two children and was again deserted."²³ The youngest, Iris, whom Clarke believes to have been "probably the most talented as an actress, dancer and singer married Martin Iredale when they were touring in *The Dollar Princess*."²⁴ Although Clarke says nothing about her subsequent fate, it may have followed the same pattern as her sisters': collapsing marriages, desertion, theatrical liaisons, children shunted back and forth among relatives, and ever-pressing financial difficulties.

What of the Dawsons? For a time at least, they fared better than the Bartleys. As Clarke says, "Their needs were small, and their income secure,"²⁵ there being no Henry Bartley lurking in the wings to squander their inheritance. They received a good education and even had a governess, but "they never lost the consciousness of who they were and why they were different."²⁶ When Harriet Bartley died in 1905, both Martha and the children, who had reason to expect some financial benefits, were bitterly disappointed to discover they were to get absolutely nothing: "It was an outcome that for many years soured their memories of Wilkie Collins's whole entourage, although they never tired of praising his many kindnesses and devotion as a father."²⁷

According to Clarke, the oldest child, Marian, was "extremely good-looking, bright and lively"; the second oldest, Constance Harried, known as Hettie, was "plainer, more subdued, and the more easily resigned to her position."²⁸ Both eventually married and both, like their mother, were long-lived, dying in the same year (1955) well into their eighties.

Wilkie's third child and only son, William Charles, known as Charley, joined the army at the age of nineteen and saw action in the Boer War. As evidenced by a photograph he cut a dashing figure in uniform; even in mufti, his handlebar mustache gave him a rather swashbuckling air. In addition to being handsome, he was quick-witted, ambitious, and opportunistic, taking as many army training courses as he could. Within five months dysentery sent him back to England, where he served as a riding instructor. He had hopes of a commission; but, when this appeared unlikely, possibly because of his parentage, he left the army in 1902 with the rank of sergeant. Soon he was chauffeur

to the Earl of Orkney, whose wife had been, like Doris Bartley, a "Gaiety Girl," very likely the connection that got him the job. This position, which involved caring for cars as well as driving them, intensified his interest in automobiles. Soon he started his own motor business, "even registering an invention for a new style variable gearbox in the name of 'William Charles Collins-Dawson, motor engineer,'" thus putting himself "in the vanguard of motoring experts and enthusiasts."²⁹ Somewhat earlier he had married Florence Sugg, daughter of a sea-captain, by whom he had two children: Helen Martha, later known as Bobbie, and Lionel. Charley became one of the organizers of the Society of Automobile Mechanic Drivers, and the young family seemed on the verge of financial security when Charley caught the flu and suddenly died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1913 at the age of thirty-eight. It took "the Dawson family over a quarter of a century to recover their financial balance."³⁰ Of Charley's two children, Lionel married Florence Louise Gibson Taylor; Bobbie married George West. Like Marian and Hettie, both Lionel and Bobbie died in the same year (1987). Lionel's daughter, Faith, who inherited the family's good looks, married William Clarke, the author of *The Secret Life*; Bobbie is survived by a son, Anthony West.

One of the most attractive features of Clarke's book is its wealth of photographs. In addition to those of Wilkie's mother, father, and brother as well as Wilkie himself, most of which can be found elsewhere, there are the unique treasures: single pictures of Caroline Graves, her daughter Harriet, and her granddaughter Doris Beresford, the Gaiety Girl; one of Wilkie and Martha Rudd, three of Martha alone, looking very grim in black dress and severe hair style, and one of Martha, her two daughters (Marian and Hettie), her daughter-in-law (Florence Sugg Dawson), and Charley's two children (Bobbie and Lionel); two of the dashing, mustachioed Charley; one of Charley, Florence, and a very young Bobbie); and one of Lionel and Faith as a little girl, both in one-piece bathing suits; all second and third generation Dawsons are remarkably handsome.

Although some allowance must naturally be made for hazy memory and familial bias, *The Secret Life* is unquestionably the unique and definitive account of the women in Wilkie Collins' life and their descendants. And a fascinating account it is. Of course, it would be foolish to assume that no further facts will be unearthed—one or two surfaced at the Victoria conference—it seems reasonable to conclude that not much will be added.

NOTES

¹William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1988). Clarke is a financier, journalist, and author of several books on the City of London (i.e., London's financial district); former city editor and financial editor of *The Times*; and currently Chairman of A.N.Z. Merchant Bank. His book has not yet been published in this country.

²John G. Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen, 1899), I, pp. 278-81.

³[Thomas Seccombe], "Collins, William Wilkie," *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 1921-1922 reprint, Vol. 22, Supplement, p. 472.

⁴Gladys Storey, *Dickens and Daughter* (London: Muller, 1939; reprint, New York: Haskell House, 1971), pp. 213-14.

⁵Clyde K. Hyder, "Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*," *PMLA*, Vol. 54, March 1939, pp. 297-303.

⁶Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Bodley Head, 1951), p. 135; a revised edition appeared in 1974.

⁷Clarke, p. x.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹Seccombe, p. 472.

¹²Laurence Ince, "Wilkie Collins: The Intimacies and the Novels," *The Wilkie Collins Society*, VI, 1986, pp. 9 and 10.

¹³Clarke, p. 91.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, note 6, p. 215.

¹⁵Ince, p. 8.

¹⁶Clarke, p. [vi].

¹⁷Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁹Ince, pp. 8-9.

²⁰Clarke, p. 203.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 202.

²³Ibid., pp. 197, 198.

²⁴Ibid., p. 197.

²⁵Ibid., p. 186.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 8.

²⁸Ibid., p. 187.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 189-90.

³⁰Ibid., p. 190.

Wilkie Collins, 'Florentia' and the *Art Journal*
Catherine Peters

An article by William M. Clarke in the 1984 number of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, "The Mystery of Collins's Articles on Italian Art," followed up an assertion by Jeremy Maas that a series of seven articles which appeared in the *Art Journal* in 1854 and 1855, signed *Florentia*, can confidently be attributed to Wilkie Collins, bear the hallmark of his style, and represent 'a substantial addition to his *oeuvre*.'"¹ William Clarke has since repeated this suggestion, in more cautious terms, in his recent biography of Collins.²

These articles were, in fact, not by Collins, but by a close friend of his, Frances Dickinson, later Frances Elliot, to whom he dedicated his novel *Poor Miss Finch* in 1872. She contributed regularly to Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine*, under the pseudonym *Florentia*, from 1853 to 1857. Eighteen articles entitled "Diary of a First Winter in Rome" which appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* from May 1854 to October 1855, were later reprinted, with some slight alternations and cuts, in *Diary of An Idle Woman in Italy*, by Frances Elliot³: Frances Dickinson married the Very Reverend Gilbert Elliot, Dean of Bristol, in 1863. Two of the *Art Journal* pieces, "The Artists' Festa" and "Visit to the Catacombs of San Calisto and the Church of San Sebastiano" were also included in this collection, becoming Chapter VIII, Volume I, and Chapter IV, Volume II, respectively.

Another book by Frances Elliot, *Roman Gossip* contains material taken from the other *Art Journal* articles. After stating that "My own recollections carry me back to about 1852," she describes a visit to Gibson's studio, and his "tinted Venus" in terms similar to, though not identical with, the article in the *Art Journal*; and goes on to describe the studio of the American sculptor Crawford. She also mentions, more briefly, many of the artists discussed in the *Art Journal* series "A Walk through the Studios of Rome," among them Story, Dessoulary, Rogers, Tilton, Page, Penry Williams, Tericrani, Overbeck, Cornelius, Riedel, Meyer, and Coleman.⁴ A further series of articles by *Florentia*, "Pilgrimages to the French Palaces," which appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* during 1856, were, with the addition of a piece from *Appleton's Journal*, turned into a book which Frances Elliot published in 1873.⁵ A translation from the German, "Death and the Doctor," appeared over the signature *Florentia* in the *New Monthly Magazine* in the last quarter of 1855.⁶ Wilkie Collins was never fluent in German: in later years he had to employ a clerk of Frederick Lehmann's to translate and reply to his business correspondence with German publishers.

From the early 1850s Frances Dickinson spent part of each year in Italy. In November 1853 she was in Florence, and her first *Florentia* article, "Gossip from Florence" appeared in the *New Monthly magazine* in December.⁷ By the time the *Art Journal* pieces were placed by Wilkie Collins, her pseudonym was well established.

The letter on which Maas relies, and the further letter cited by Clarke, are both consistent with the articles in the *Art Journal* being by Frances Dickinson. She is the "writer of the Article on the 'Studios of Rome'" for whom he requests a copy of the *Art Journal* for June 1854; she is "the friend of mine now resident in Rome" referred to in the letter of May 3 1854. Wilkie Collins, knowing Frances Dickinson well, would not have stolen her pseudonym, and could not have used it by accident. She was already a capable and experienced journalist, who had published a number of articles in *Bentley's Miscellany*, to which she contributed anonymously from 1852 to 1854.⁸ Wilkie Collins also contributed to *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1852. Richard Bentley also published a book by her in 1851, at the time when he was Wilkie Collins's publisher.⁹

It is possible, though it can never be proved, that Wilkie Collins, unable to place his Italian articles, made a gift of some of his material to Frances Dickinson, and that she used it in one or two of her articles. However she had a wealth of resources of her own to rely upon, and considerably more time than he had to investigate the artistic life of Rome. The evidence for all the *Art Journal* articles being by Frances Dickinson, later Elliot, rather than Wilkie Collins, seems to me inescapable.

NOTES

¹Jeremy Maas, *The Victorian Art World in Photographs*, London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1984, p. 168.

²William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, Allison and Busby 1988, pp. 74-76.

³Frances Elliot, *Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy*, 2 volumes, London, Chapman and Hall, 1871.

⁴Frances Elliot, *Roman Gossip*, London, John Murray, 1894 Chapter 12, p. 289 et seq.

⁵Frances Elliot, *Old Court Life in France*, 2 volumes, London, Chapman and Hall, 1873.

⁶*New Monthly Magazine* 105, p. 354.

⁷*New Monthly Magazine* 99 [1853] pp. 442-450.

⁸*Bentley's Miscellany* 31 [1852] pp. 185-196, 639-644; 32 [1852] pp. 609-618; 34 [1853] pp. 50-57; 35 [1854] pp. 338-345; 496-507. For attribution, see *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, IV.

⁹*The Priest Miracles of Rome, a Memoir for the Present Time*, [by Frances Geils, otherwise Dickinson, afterwards Frances Minto Elliot] London, Richard Bentley, 1851.

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The Wilkie Collins Centennial Conference:
Celebrating the Man and His Work
Peter Thomas

For the weekend of September 27–October 1, 1989 scholars and enthusiasts of Wilkie Collins from Great Britain, the United States, and Canada gathered at the Dunsmuir Lodge Conference Centre to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the author's death. Sponsored by the University of Victoria and held at their conference facility fifteen miles north of Victoria, British Columbia, the Wilkie Collins Centennial Conference was an immense success. From Friday evening to Sunday at noon, over drinks and meals, in conference rooms and in hallways, delegates talked Collins. Wilkie in the morning, Wilkie in the evening, Wilkie at supper time—for the connoisseur of Collins, such a diet of conversation was all too rare. At last, if only for a weekend, Wilkie Collins commanded center stage, and those in attendance were delighted to be part of the occasion.

The conference officially began at seven p.m. on the Friday, with the prominent Collins scholar, Kirk H. Beetz, tackling the contentious issue of Collins's literary status. With a paper entitled "Why Wilkie Collins is a Great Writer," Beetz effectively set the tone for the sixteen presentations to follow, which were scheduled over the next day and a half and which addressed topics in the life and the fiction. Among those examining biographical issues were Sue Lonoff, author of the fine work, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (1982), and Catherine Peters, who was in the midst of writing a critical biography of Collins, and who presented some fresh discoveries concerning the women in the writer's life. Fred Kaplan, author of the recent *Dickens: A Biography* (1988), spoke on the Collins–Dickens relationship in "Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens: A Tale of Two Writers," and Andrew Gasson, Secretary of the Wilkie Collins Society, provided interesting glimpses of Collins and his work in a slide show.

Speakers who focused on Collins's fiction examined concerns as various as narrativity, structure, gender, psychology, and folk elements. Of course Collins's two masterpieces, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, received scrutiny, but participants also discussed the other two novels of the major decade, *No Name* and *Armadale*, and *The Dead*

Secret, Heart and Science, The New Magdalen, and one of the most intriguing of the late novels, *The Law and the Lady*. Distinguished critics, such as John R. Reed, who spoke on "The Stories of *The Moonstone*," John Sutherland, who spoke on "Wilkie Collins and the Origins of Sensationalism," and Ira Nadel, who spoke on "Wilkie Collins and His Illustrators," alternated with others, such as Christine Moreau, Mary Rimmer, Kathleen O'Fallon, and Peter Thoms, who are just beginning their careers. All of this variety—of critical approaches, of novels treated, and of critical generations—attests to Collins's artistic vitality. As the conference confirmed, Collins's novels, both the best known and the lesser known, invite a diversity of interests, and continue to attract serious students of literature.

Participants in the conference could hear Christopher Kent on "Wilkie Collins and the Social Historian," Patricia Frick on *The Woman in White*, and Tim Moreton on *The Dead Secret*. They could attend papers by Barbara Fass Leavy and Peter Caracciolo, both authors of significant articles on *The Woman in White*. And, perhaps most importantly, they could meet one another. For many of the delegates, who had studied Collins in isolation and heretofore encountered very few Collins enthusiasts, the opportunity to chat about the common interest was rare and valued. Robert Ashley, author of the pioneering work *Wilkie Collins* (1952) was in attendance, as were the recent biographer William Clarke and his wife, Faith Clarke, who is Collins's great granddaughter. At last there was the chance to put faces to names—names which had previously only been appendages to books and articles—and to discover, for example, that the editor of this journal bears an uncanny resemblance to Wilkie Collins himself!

Reg Terry, the chairman of the Wilkie Collins Centennial Conference, and Nelson Smith, the secretary, deserve congratulations. Not only did they allow us to commemorate Collins's life and achievement, but they organized a wonderful weekend. Formal papers were balanced by informal talk and by a Victorian parlour entertainment that included a dramatic reading of "A Terribly Strange Bed." Discussions about Collins, good food, comfortable accommodations, spectacular views of mountains and sea, and a pervasive spirit of friendliness combined to create a special experience which will not soon be forgotten.

Palmer, William J., *The Detective and Mister Dickens: A Secret Victorian Journal, Attributed to Wilkie Collins* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990). 290 pp. \$17.95.

Steve John Farmer

Charles Dickens enjoyed Wilkie Collins's company during the first half of their twenty-year friendship in large part because the younger writer, unlike Dickens's conservative companions Forster and Henry Wills, enthusiastically participated in his mentor's post-prandial roamings through the dark and seamy sections of London. Their wanderings have long been the cause of speculation and debate among biographers. Did the two roam the London darkness strictly to witness, to fire their imaginations, to hone their skills of observation? Or did they participate in the debaucheries of London's dens of pornography, prostitution and drugs? With his recent novel *The Detective and Mr. Dickens*, William J. Palmer reflects on this mystery and offers his version of Collins and Dickens's reasons for venturing regularly into the dark Victorian underworld in the early 1850s. The result is a clever bit of entertaining speculation marred by several technical problems difficult to overlook.

Collins would probably have enjoyed the frames that Palmer creates to begin his story. The "Editor's Note" that tells us how Collins's secret journals were uncovered recalls the machinery of the Prologue to *The Moonstone*; the chance meeting of Inspector Field (of *Household Words* fame¹) and Collins at Dickens's funeral, which allows the "two old soldiers . . . [to spend] the greater part of that afternoon in [a] warm pub" (8) to recall the past, resembles the frames that Collins used in *After Dark* and *The Queen of Hearts*; and the presentation of the story in the form of Collins's journal revives fond memories of Marian Halcombe's diary in *The Woman in White* and Lydia Gwilt's confessional journal in *Armada*.

Collins might also have appreciated the relatively fast-paced frolic that the main figures, Dickens, Field, and Collins himself enjoy through the novel. They and the reader move quickly from public executions to public houses and private clubs of all sorts, from backstage drama at Covent Garden theater to waterside vigils and floating bodies straight from the murky Thames of *Our Mutual Friend*, from the Bow Street precinct headquarters to lewd strip shows at secret upper class brothels and ritualistic sexual sacrifices of Victorian virgins by the noblemen of the Henry Ashbee's "Dionysian Circle²." We witness stakeouts, housebreakings, manhunts, breakneck chases, attempted suicides, attempted murders, a murder, streetfights, fleshy

auctions, rapes. The book has action, no doubt. And it also contains a mystery—not the caliber of Wilkie’s mysteries, but a mystery nevertheless—that Collins might have enjoyed. We follow Dickens as he plunges into a psychologically cathartic friendship with Collins, Field, and the London night after the death of Dora, his infant daughter. We see him become amateur detective as he attempts to help Field solve the murder of an acquaintance whose body is discovered in the Thames. We witness the obsessive and on-sided relationship he develops with Miss Ternan, who becomes a fringe player in the murder mystery herself. We even see Dickens involve himself with Henry Ashbee, Victorian London’s notorious pioneer pornographer. All potentially fascinating pseudo-history.

But there are certain problems with Palmer’s book that a master technician like Collins would not have overlooked, and that any reader of Dickens and Collins might find hard to balance with the Victorian milieu that those two masters created and sustained in their fiction, in forty plus novels between them. To a technical matter first.

Collins, we may happily reflect, was a Victorian gentleman. He may have lived an odd life, complete with semi-secret identities, semi-secret sexual relationships, and semi-secret families. But he was a Victorian gentleman, a Victorian novelist. He could not, however, at least until late in his life, have considered himself a “Victorian”; in fact, it is safe to assume that no one considered Collins—or anyone else living in the 1840s and 1850s, when this novel is set—a “Victorian” until the mid-seventies, when the word was used for the first time.³ So, when the Collins of Palmer’s novel describes himself as being too formal, too stiff, too proper “a Victorian gentleman” (179), or when the novel’s Henry Ashbee tells Dickens, on May 9, 1851, of a work in progress—“It is an extended analysis of London life. For lack of a better title, I am calling it *The Memoirs of a Victorian Gentleman*” (163)—or when the novel’s trio of detectives later discover Ashbee’s pornographic manuscript, titled, sure enough, *My Secret Life: Memoirs of a Victorian Gentleman* (195), Palmer’s credibility suffers.

Too picky? Perhaps. But Collins revered accuracy, often claiming that he depended on his lawyers to provide him with answers to legal questions that arose in his fiction and on his doctors or chemists for advice on medical issues about which he wrote.⁴

Another of the bothers with this book may simply spring from the sense of Victorian propriety (prudery?) that I have acquired from reading Dickens and Collins for the last twenty years. Whatever the cause, I couldn’t help noticing that the Wilkie Collins of this novel, or, more likely, the creator of the Wilkie Collins of this novel, has an

almost obsessive attraction to Victorian breasts. Here, for the sake of making a point or two, not for simple lasciviousness I assure you, are some passages whose bouncing central images are unmistakable:

From an extended introduction of one of the novel's prostitutes:

"A large woman in a black dress laced loosely across her breasts, bolder than the others, rose to joke with Field." (32)

"The one aspect of her appearance which could not be overlooked were the two capacious mounds straining at the laces of her bodice." (33)

"With her free hand, the harlot clawed at the laces of her bodice. 'No, hit's this you want,' the creature crooned obscenely, as the top of her dress dropped to her waist." (34)

"The creature recoiled away from him, the whiteness of her exposed breasts undulating in the saffron light of the fog-bound gaslamp." (34)

From a discussion of Collins's initial attraction to another of the fiction's women of the streets:

"I was captured by the woman. Her neck was white and her full breasts almost completely exposed by the low-cut, loosely laced bosom of her dark, blood-coloured dress." (38)

From a description of an employee of a Victorian brothel:

"Her scarlet gown failed miserably (and intentionally, I am sure) to enclose her voluminous breasts." (93)

"At a command of some gentleman's voice, she unfastened her tightly laced corset thus freeing her breasts. . . ." (95)

From our introduction to, of all people, Dickens's Miss Ternan:

"The coarse brown peasant's smock fell open. Its neck hole had been slashed downward and the front was almost completely undone to her waist. She stood there helplessly, tears brimming in her eyes, her white shoulders and the tops of her breasts almost fully revealed." (109-10)

From an extended description of a street brawl:

"The whole top of the larger woman's dress came away in Meg's hand and, when released, fluttered in tatters at Scarlet Bess's waist. The result was the complete exposure of Scarlet Bess's more than impressive breasts." (211)

"Scarlet Bess hugged herself, all arms and elbows, in the attempt to cover the rolling milky expanse of her exposed breasts." (211)

"She missed her mark but her sharp nails raked down across her adversary's neck and bared breasts." (212)

"As a consequence I was pummelled about the ears by the unrestrained mounds of her wildly swinging breasts." (213)

From Wilkie's sexual encounter with the novel's Collinsian Magdalen. Is this Jackie or Wilkie Collins?

"With one uncomplicated motion she unlaced the top of her dress leaving herself, in an instant, naked to the waist. . . . She lowered herself to me, and, as we knelt facing one another like two devout supplicants praying in a darkened church, my lips sought and kissed her risen breasts." (237)

And, finally, here again, is poor Ellen Ternan:

"Ashbee stripped the cloth from her breasts . . . [and] ran the tip of his riding whip over and around Miss Ternan's exposed breasts. He stimulated her aureola with the whip. . . . She hung silently from her bonds, unaware of the liberties being taken with her person, and the six sets of eyes feeding upon her naked breasts." (254)

This has become silly.

Sillier still, though, is some of the action involving the character who is supposedly based on an historical figure, Wilkie Collins. The real Collins was a well known lover of comfort and restraint, who complained about participating in any activity involving the slightest physical rigor. His fictional counterpart discovers an superhuman athleticism in this novel that borders on the ludicrous. At one point near the climax of the story—after Wilkie has engaged in a hair-pulling, groin-kicking, and (of course) breast-slapping free-for-all with a couple of prostitutes, we find our narrator/hero climbing onto housetops, crashing to the rescue through skylights, dodging bullets, and chasing villains helter-skelter through secret passageways and crooked London streets. Victorian verisimilitude?

NOTES

¹Inspector Charles Frederick Field was the subject of an article, "On Duty with Inspector Field," that Dickens wrote for the June 14, 1851 number of *Household Words*. Dickens's interest in the police and detective work also found its voice in several other *HW* articles between mid-1850 and mid-1851.

² Henry Spencer Ashbee receives much attention in Steven Marcus's examination of sexuality and pornography in mid-nineteenth century England, *The Other Victorians*.

³ The *OED* notes the first recorded use of "Victorian" as an adjective used to describe something "of, or belonging to, designating, or typical of the reign of Queen Victoria" as occurring in 1875.

⁴ In his 1952 biography of Collins, Kenneth Robinson writes, "Wilkie was always most anxious to have the factual details of his novels correct. Writing against time, separated from books of reference, he is constantly importuning his friends to supply topographical details and information on a variety of subjects" (166).

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