

'normality' while always refracting physical disability through the prism of social and gender identities.

These essays illustrate the extraordinary range of approaches that can be brought to bear on Collins's work. His influence on twentieth-century culture is too diffuse to be easily pinned down, and in the final chapter Rachel Malik stresses the continuities between mid-nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural forms in her survey of the reworking of Collins's plots in early film, twentieth-century television, the pastiches of Victorian fiction by James Wilson and Sarah Waters, and the recent musical version of *The Woman in White*. Malik notes the ways in which Collins's preoccupation with substitution and secret lives can be rewritten in the light of our own anxieties and preoccupations, and as these essays show, it is in dramatising the concerns and anxieties of his own time that Wilkie Collins speaks so closely to our own.

NOTE

1. For a detailed overview of Collins criticism, see Lillian Nayder 'Wilkie Collins Studies: 1983-1999', *Dickens Studies Annual* 28 (1999), 257-329.

I

TIM DOLIN

Collins's career and the visual arts

When *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* was published in November 1852, the name of its author, W. Wilkie Collins, was familiar to a handful of readers and reviewers of his only two other works: a biography of his father, the late distinguished painter and Fellow of the Royal Academy, William Collins (1848); and a historical romance, *Antonina* (1850), which showed, among other signs of promise, that the RA's son had inherited 'a painter's eye for description'.¹ Understandably, then, when reviewers were faced with the unenviable job of reviewing *Basil* alongside William Makepeace Thackeray's great historical novel, *The History of Henry Esmond* (published in the same month), many of them seized on what they knew about Collins's family background to draw an analogy between fiction and the fine arts. As *Bentley's Miscellany* put it at the end of 1852:

There is the same difference between them as between a picture by Hogarth and a picture by Fuseli. We had well nigh named in the place of [Collins] one of the great painters, whose names are borne by the author of *Basil* [Collins was named after his godfather, the renowned genre painter, Sir David Wilkie]. But in truth the writer of that work ought to have been called Mr. Salvator Fuseli. There is nothing either of Wilkie or Collins about it. (CH, p. 45)

This reviewer was impressed by *Basil*, but could not subdue a note of alarm at the faintly republican, or at any rate foreign, undertones in its 'intensity': its 'passionate love and deep vindictive hatred' (CH, p. 46). 'It is of the Godwin school of fiction,' he remarked meaningfully, wondering, too, at Collins's audacious relocation of the 'violent spasmodic action' of cheap lower-class magazine fiction to the ordinary everyday middle-class neighbourhoods of a society in 'an advanced stage of civilization' (CH, p. 46). There is 'something artist-like', the reviewer concluded, keeping up the analogy, even in *Basil*'s 'apparent want of art'. But not *English* artist-like: if Thackeray embodied in literature the vigour and true feeling of the English school – the tradition of anecdotal and sentimental moral subject painting descended

from Hogarth – Collins's first venture into a story of modern-day England was too wildly Romantic and weirdly surrealistic, too much like Salvator Rosa and Henry Fuseli, to be the work of the father's son – or the godfather's godson.

The argument for the un-Englishness of Collins's art would not prove prophetic. The 1860s sensation novel, of which *Basil* was the most significant precursor, succeeded precisely because it was so English, trading in the secrets lying in wait behind the façade of respectable English reserve and propriety. In a long 'Letter of Dedication' to *Basil*, moreover (and again ten years later in the Preface to *No Name* in 1862), Collins went out of his way to explain and justify what he was trying to do in language that might almost have been used to debate Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1769–90), still the bible of academic English art practice in 1852. Only by being true to the Actual, Collins contended, echoing John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843–60), would 'the genuineness and value of the Ideal [be] sure to spring out of it'. Few critics of *Basil* agreed. 'Mr. Collins, as the son of an eminent painter, should know that the proper office of Art is to elevate and purify in pleasing', the *Athenaeum* retorted.² 'It matters not whether the artist hold the pencil or the pen,' intoned the *Westminster Review* in October 1853 (under the anonymous editorship of Marian Evans (George Eliot)):

the same great rules apply to both. He may simply copy nature as he sees it, and then the spectator has the pleasure proportioned to the beauty of the scene copied. He may give a noble, spirit-stirring scene . . . He may take the higher moral ground . . ., or, like Hogarth, read a lesson to the idle and the dissipated. He may also paint scenes of cruelty and sensuality so gross that his picture will be turned to the wall.
(*CH*, pp. 52–3)

Collins's appeal to the visual arts in his 'Letter of Dedication' was calculated to raise these very questions of morality and 'truth to nature'. His aim was to defend the novel's extreme 'realism' – founded in the aesthetics of popular working-class radicalism and likely to be found thoroughly debased – in language (the *Westminster Review* noted) of 'no small pretension' (*CH*, p. 53). On the face of it, Collins seems to be borrowing the cultural authority of the artistic establishment, where such questions were central to definitions of high art. But there is more to it than that. The 'Letter' was, rather, an opportunity to declare his seriousness of purpose by associating himself not with advances in the novel (there was no authoritative aesthetics of fiction to which he could appeal: the novel was attacked and defended in terms generally borrowed from the moralised aesthetics of high culture) but with the most advanced thinking in London art circles. Collins's model was not only Ruskin,

but the reformist young painters who rejected the rigid orthodoxies of the Academy. These painters fell into two groups. One was a group of older artists, led by William Powell Frith and Augustus Egg, and known as 'The Clique'. They had formed in the early 1840s to set up a venue for young artists in opposition to the Academy. Emphatically populist and democratic – they believed their work should be judged by nonartists, for example – they were committed to elevating the status of genre painting over history painting: that is, anecdotal narrative pictures of everyday-life subjects (in the tradition of Wilkie or Collins) over paintings of grand historical scenes, or incidents from the Bible or classical mythology. These mild heretics were soon overshadowed by a second, more controversial, clique, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, led by William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the prodigy of the Academy Schools, John Everett Millais, with their creed of 'truth to Nature' and their adherence to the aesthetic values of the early Renaissance. Both groups were implacably opposed to each other's principles and practices, yet in the late 1840s and early 1850s they all met together at 38 Blandford Square, where Collins lived with his mother, Harriet, and his brother, Charles Allston Collins (Charley), a close associate of the Pre-Raphaelites. Over the next few years, as each group pursued its different aims, they both began to think seriously about 'the aesthetic problem for the age': the problem, identified by Martin Meisel, of having to reconcile the new glamour of a booming modern society with the old glamour of high art. Meisel continues:

the Victorian artist, working for a comprehensive audience, had a double injunction laid upon him. He found himself between an appetite for reality and a requirement for signification. Specification, individuation, autonomy of detail, and the look and feel of the thing itself pulled one way; while placement in a larger meaningful pattern, appealing to the moral sense and the understanding, pulled another.³

This was the very problem that Collins faced with *Basil*: how to find a 'larger meaningful pattern' for the representation of modern life beyond the prevailing mode of sentimental moral realism linking the mainstream middle-class novel before 1850 to the tradition of popular everyday-life subject painting still dominant under Sir Edwin Landseer and the descendants of William Hogarth. Collins was not alone in rejecting that particular strain of Wilkie and Collins that runs through Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Thackeray. But he was unique among the generation of novelists coming to prominence in the dramatically changed and changing social and economic conditions of the 1850s and 1860s – Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, Charles Kingsley, George Eliot and George Meredith. He had an unusual degree of mobility between what were, in practice, relatively

distinct cultural networks – the London art world, the Dickens circle and its overlapping journalistic and literary circles, and the London theatrical scene – as well as an unusual degree of mobility between generally remote social classes. This multiple mobility allowed Collins to draw upon a much wider range of experiences of, and responses to, modernity than many of his English contemporaries.

Collins's life fell into three distinct phases which reflect that mobility: the years from his birth until 1851 when he lived 'very much in the society of artists' (*B&CI*, 53); his triumphant middle years as a journalist and novelist (between 1851, when he met Dickens, and 1870, the year of Dickens's death); and the last two decades of his life, in which he strove to make a name for himself in the theatre. Most short accounts of Collins's life lay the stress on the middle period, because, even now, when his critical reputation is higher than ever before, he is chiefly remembered for the work of a single decade: the 1860s, when he wrote *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*. But Collins's early years in the art world were vital in laying the foundations for his successes – and failures – in the literary, journalistic and theatrical worlds. Because this phase is often passed over quickly, therefore, and because more detailed accounts of Collins's relationship with Dickens and experience in the theatre are given elsewhere in this volume, the following pages offer an interpretation of his working life framed, so to speak, by his early life among painters struggling to find an adequate expressive form for the experience of modernity.

William Wilkie Collins was born on 8 January 1824 into a relatively comfortable and happy family life. His father had struggled early in his career to establish himself as a painter. But through a combination of hard work, the tireless cultivation of rich and powerful patrons, and careful management of money, William Collins had reached a position of relative eminence by the 1830s and 1840s. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy, and left an estate of £11,000 when he died of heart disease at the age of only 58 in 1847. The young Wilkie grew up surrounded by many of the leading figures in late Romantic literary and art circles. His mother was a cousin of the Scottish painter Alexander Geddes, and his aunt, Margaret Carpenter, was a well-known portrait painter. John Constable, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Ruskin, and many others visited the family in a succession of houses in and around Marylebone and Hampstead. Collins attended day and boarding schools, where he never felt at ease, doubtless in part because he hated sports, was clumsy and, most of all, was an unusual-looking person. Even as an adult he was short (five foot three in his top-boots), with noticeably small, delicate hands and feet; and top-heavy – he had a large triangular head with an imposing bulge on his forehead

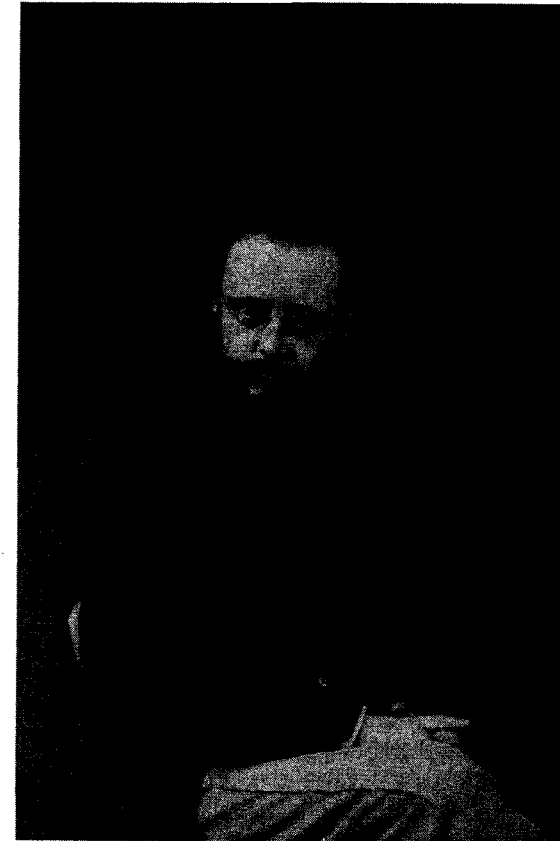


Figure 1. Photograph of Wilkie Collins 1864 by Cundall Downes & Co. Reproduced with the permission of Paul Lewis.

above his right eye. In the 1850s he took advantage of the mid-Victorian fashion for long beards in an attempt to hide the striking disproportion of his upper and lower body (see fig. 1).

Yet although he was extremely self-conscious about his physical defects, and suffered from lifelong anxiety and restlessness (he was afflicted with 'strange tics and fidgets' (Peters, p. 100)), Collins seems to have been liberated as well as oppressed by them. His deformity, however slight, licensed the eccentricity which was a lifelong cover for his unconventionality. Rebellious as a youth, particularly against the evangelicalism and snobbery of his father, he developed a kind of strategic passive resistance to stifling middle-class social codes and customs. For a long time, doubtless freed by his father's early death, he simply refused to ascend to conventional

Victorian bourgeois manhood and independence. He chose instead to live on indefinitely with his mother, who had, like her son, been released by William Collins's death, in her case into a lively and unconventional widowhood. Collins stayed with his mother until he was thirty-two years old, and did not even have a bank account of his own until 1860, when *The Woman in White* became a hit. He hated formality. He dressed as he liked (never wearing evening dress for dinner, and instructing his guests in the same), said what he liked, ate and drank as much as he liked, and answered only to 'Wilkie' among friends, never to 'Collins' or 'Mr Collins'. He was a settled bachelor, untidy and awkward, who fled the stuffiness of London for Paris at any opportunity, and steadfastly resisted marriage to either of his two lower-class mistresses. Caroline Graves lived with him openly after 1859, however, along with her daughter Harriet, who became his amanuensis. He met Martha Rudd, the daughter of a shepherd, in 1864, and installed her as 'Mrs Dawson' in lodgings near his house. She bore him three children.⁴

Collins's domestic arrangements do not, however, imply actual bohemianism. Many of his contemporaries, including Charles Reade, the staid Frith and Egg, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Marian Evans, lived with partners without being formally married (though with Braddon and Evans this was because their companions had wives still living). Similarly, Collins was also an opium eater, a sure sign, one might conclude, of a bohemian personality – a reputation he earned partly because the more hidebound Dickens allowed himself to be led astray in his younger protégé's company, visiting music halls and bordellos on the Continent, and venturing into seedier parts of London. But the truth is more complicated. Collins suffered increasingly poor health after 1853 for which he was prescribed laudanum sometime in the late 1850s. The cause was a debilitating rheumatic illness, apparently inherited from his father, which was agonisingly painful and ultimately bent him almost double (he later also contracted angina). Although he tried more than once to cure the addiction (resorting on one occasion to morphine), he never succeeded. Collins was no Coleridge or Thomas De Quincey, therefore, Setting aside the character of Ezra Jennings in *The Moonstone* (1868), his creative life does not appear, consciously at least, to have been greatly influenced by opium. His steeply declining health, too, was as likely to have been caused by a combination of his habits of excessive eating and drinking and that other endemic Victorian condition – overwork.

Although Collins was markedly at odds with mid-Victorian middle-class morality, therefore, and sympathetic to the vulnerability of social outsiders and the oppressiveness of social norms (most explicitly in his last phase, when he openly challenges a range of inequities), he was in other respects

typical of his time. He declined, mildly and without show, to play the part of either the respectable Victorian or the pattern bohemian, but his career nevertheless followed the trajectory of someone imbued early in his life with the mid-Victorian work ethic. There was perhaps more of his father in him, then, than we might at first suspect. When he convinced William Collins that he was serious about literature by publishing a short story in a magazine, completing a full-length romance set in Tahiti, and undertaking research into a historical novel (*Antonina*, in 1845), his father agreed to remove him from the offices of Antrobus & Co., the tea merchants in the Strand where he had been employed as a clerk with a view to a career in the trade. Collins entered Lincoln's Inn to study for the legal profession, and was to a degree inculcated in the professional ethos. 'No barrister or physician ever worked harder at his profession,' his friend Edmund Yates later wrote, or 'devoted more time, or thought, or trouble to it, was prouder of it, or pursued it with more zeal or earnestness than Mr. Collins has done with regard to literature.'⁵

Collins's meticulous work habits were also a typical manifestation of the commercial evangelicalism underpinning the professionalisation of cultural practices during this period. He was in this regard much like his painter friend Frith (of whom more below): 'content to regard art as a profession like every other, and to clear [his mind] of any mysterious and sacramental ideas in connexion with it'.⁶ And although he does not quite put it in the same terms, these were the values for which he praised his father in the two-volume *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., RA* (1848). William Collins lived and worked, as G. M. Young would have it, in the 'dark and narrow framework of Evangelical and economic truth'.⁷ A curious amalgam of devout low churchman and bigoted Tory, his success depended on the patronage of rich landowners and statesmen – not the manufacturers and capitalists who would come to dominate the art world – and was secured at the price of originality and, in the end, an enduring reputation. Collins was 'a painter of the coast and cottage life and scenery of England', whose scenes of rustic simplicity and 'quiet pathos' were a characteristic product of the Royal Academy of the period.⁸ Like Charles Leslie, William Mulready, William Etty, Wilkie and many others of his generation, he painted children and families, 'realistic' in their social contexts and ragged clothes (working on the shore, for instance, or playing around their cottages) but idealised in conception: sentimentalised, prettified, cleaned up, and generalised by Academic precepts of proportion, harmony of colour, balance, finish and taste. In the *Memoirs* Collins judiciously avoided any explicit evaluation of his father's work, claiming 'the difficulty and delicacy' of being called upon to write impartially about a man it had 'hitherto been his only ambition

to respect' (I, ch. 1). Instead, he reframed the life of William Collins as an exemplary antiohemian fable of material success won from hard work and heroic persistence.⁹ But when the *Memoirs* appeared, nearly two years after his death and at the end of the year of revolutions, 1848, William Collins was already like a ghostly figure from a simpler world. While the son was writing the father's life, sporadic violence and unrest was breaking out across London, and troops were being brought in to safeguard the Houses of Parliament. This was a time of momentous change, and Collins feared that it would, almost inevitably, hasten the annihilation of his father's reputation: he had been, after all, a producer of outmoded art in the pay of the old landed ruling classes. Would this man's life attract any attention, his son concluded doubtfully, 'in these times of fierce political contention, and absorbing political anxiety' (II, ch. 4)?

It was a good question because the moral worth of genre painting – the mainstay of the English school – was coming to be doubted in those confused days, when other cultural forms such as the novel were boldly taking up social themes and grappling more honestly with the conditions of contemporary life, and when the Pre-Raphaelites were arming themselves against a moribund art establishment. Could anyone still believe, as Richard Redgrave did, that 'some touching incident, some tender episode, or some sweet expression' really put the viewers of these paintings in touch with 'our higher humanity'?¹⁰ Collins tried to head off that question in the Conclusion to the *Memoirs* by reclaiming his father as 'a painter for all classes' whose work would continue to 'appeal . . . to the uneducated, as well as to the informed, in Art' (II, ch. 4). It is difficult to imagine William Collins's best-known picture, *Rustic Civility* – which shows an idealised peasant child tugging his forelock to the shadow of the squire approaching his estate on horseback – appealing to Chartists.¹¹ Yet Collins here puts his finger on the very quality that would transform genre painting in the next few years; and the quality that would characterise his own literary art.

As the political climate cooled in the early 1850s, many of the leading genre painters began to reject the idealised rural home scenes of Wilkie, Collins and Mulready, turning their attention to images of everyday urban contemporary life. At the same time, the Pre-Raphaelites were intent on pushing their critique of petrified Academic aesthetics beyond history painting by appropriating and modernising the conventional materials of the English genre tradition. Working in parallel – and, in reality, the two camps had a good deal to do with each other in their day-to-day working lives – the Pre-Raphaelites and Frith and his friends together took the picture of modern life in the city in two distinct directions. The first was towards the condition-of-England picture – the problem picture, concerned

with what Ruskin called the stern facts of modern life. These were characteristically intimate dramas of private (and usually sexual) morality set in urban or suburban domestic interiors; or, later, forms of social realism focused on working-class hardship. They are epitomised, respectively, by Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1854), Egg's *Past and Present* (1862) and Luke Fildes's *Houseless and Hungry* (1869). The other dominant form of contemporary picture was the so-called 'panoramic epitome' of English life and character.¹² Set outdoors in the vast public spaces of modernity such as parks, railway stations, post offices, city streets and race courses, these pictures represented class relations through minutely detailed and ordered anatomies of the mid-Victorian crowd. The best-known Pre-Raphaelite example is Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1852–65); equally well known are Frith's crowd-pleasing 'hat and trousers pictures', of which *Derby Day* (1858) is the best known.¹³

Through the 1850s and into the 1860s, the Pre-Raphaelites dispersed and the Academy went on exhibiting mediocre anecdotal literary and historical subject pictures in the same old manner. Millais returned to the art establishment and became the leading Academic genre painter of his generation (and, in time, President of the Royal Academy), Rossetti was joined by the younger generation of medievalists, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, and Holman Hunt was left to recast himself as the authentic Pre-Raphaelite. Frith, for his part, also kept up conventional historical subjects. But the painting of modern life caught on and endured as a new popular art form. Aided by the rapid progress of photography, the improvement of commercial engraving technologies, the rise of the social cartoonists (such as John Leech and George du Maurier), and the advent of pictorial news magazines such as the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*, a generation of Academy-trained genre painters encountered new ways of seeing and representing contemporary social subjects.¹⁴ Because modern-life pictures flouted one of the first principles of the Royal Academy – Reynolds's dictum that contemporaneity was the enemy of universality – they were, at first, puzzling and confronting to Academy visitors, for whom high art meant mythical, allegorical or historical subjects.¹⁵ In the first half of the 1850s, a picture such as Holman Hunt's portrayal of the remorse of a kept mistress, *The Awakening Conscience*, attracted huge public controversy, played out in letters to *The Times*.¹⁶ In the same exhibition the first of Frith's gigantic panoramas, *Ramsgate Sands* (1854), was also dismissed as 'a piece of vulgar Cockney business unworthy of being represented even in an illustrated paper'.¹⁷ But only four years later his follow-up *Derby Day* was so popular that it had 'to have a railing and a policeman placed in front of it to protect it from the throng of admirers' – the first picture

to be so honoured since Wilkie's *Chelsea Pensioners* of 1822.¹⁸ 'Some people go so far as to say "It is the picture of the age,"' Frith noted in his diary with satisfaction.¹⁹ Ruskin was not among them. He described it scornfully as 'a kind of cross between John Leech and Wilkie, with a dash of daguerreotype here and there, and some pretty seasoning with Dickens's sentiment'.²⁰ That combination of the photographic, the journalistic, the novelistic and the Hogarthian proved spectacularly popular with the rapidly growing and increasingly diverse new markets for culture, however. The Victorians paid handsomely to marvel at a collective likeness of themselves in a work of art.

Like Frith, Collins recognised the vital necessity (and great challenge) of getting through to these 'greatly enlarged and heterogeneous . . . publics' – the educated and semi-educated readers, theatregoers, and buyers of pictures and engravings.²¹ He was never able to reach the lucrative literary underclass that he dubbed (in 1858) the 'unknown public' – the millions of semi-literate lower-class readers of penny dreadfuls – but he did manage to tap into the large and miscellaneous market that emerged at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Crystal Palace extravaganza, which ran for five months over that summer, linked the arts to industrial progress, proclaimed a new faith in common social aims, and encouraged a new cultural populism. Hundreds of thousands of people attended from widely divergent regional and social backgrounds ranging upwards from the higher levels of the working class. The spectacle of them all mingling together has become a more enduring image of the period than any of the exhibits – partly because it fascinated the Victorians themselves, and, through the cartoons of Leech and others, laid the groundwork for Frith's pageants of social consent. What underpinned that consent was a sense of optimism and chauvinism that would be characteristic of the cultural nationalism of the next two decades.

Greatly increased demand from this growing sector precipitated new systems of cultural production in the 1850s and 1860s. These included the spectacular boom in fiction, painting (the system of patronage gave way to the picture dealer and commercial engraver at the same time) and theatre.²² Dickens, unfailingly alert to social and cultural trends, successfully capitalised on this miscellaneous market in his twopenny weeklies, *Household Words* (1850–9) and *All the Year Round* (1859–93): they made him one of the most successful entrepreneurs of the cultural boom. But arguably it was Collins, not Dickens, who gave voice to the urban and (increasingly) suburban lives of this public. He recognised that in England in the 1850s and 1860s, modernity was experienced not as Dickens had imagined it in the more restive 1830s and 1840s, as a tumult of productive and destructive energy and change, but rather as an insidious, compulsory ordinariness.

To offer a definition of modernity – 'the social and cultural upheavals caused by rapid capitalist economic development and corresponding new modes of perception and experience of time and space as transitory, fleeting, fortuitous or arbitrary' – is to miss the subtle and crucial differences between the decades of *Oliver Twist* (1838) to *Dombey and Son* (1846–8) and that of *The Woman in White* (1859–60).²³ Those novels all express what Raymond Williams called a crisis of unprecedented experience: 'rapid and inescapable social change' that 'brought in new feelings, people, relationships; rhythms newly known, discovered, articulated', and produced 'a new kind of novel', a 'fiction uniquely capable of realising a new kind of reality'.²⁴ But in Collins the experience of modernity itself does not misshape the entire novelistic world as it does Dickens's world. So different are those worlds, in fact, that Henry James might just as well have said that 'the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings' in Collins are far more terrifying than the terrors of *Oliver Twist*.²⁵ For what is Dickens's London to us, or we to it? After the 1860s, everything in Dickens, even the 'bran new' Veneerings (in *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864–5), feels older, *different*.

And the difference is this. Modernity in Dickens is externalised and melodramatised as a visible force: a reality that was, T. S. Eliot declared, 'almost supernatural'.²⁶ This is immediately apparent if we compare the work of Dickens's major illustrators, Cruikshank and Hablot Browne ('Phiz') – in Manichaean black and white – with the more naturalistic and mundane realism of Fildes, who was employed (at Millais's suggestion) to illustrate *Edwin Drood* (1870) after Collins's brother Charley (who was married to Dickens's daughter) was forced to withdraw owing to ill-health in 1869. George Cruikshank's 'vividly terrible images', James remembered, introduced something 'more subtly sinister, or more suggestively queer, than the frank badnesses and horrors' of *Oliver Twist*.²⁷ But Fildes's sober, realistic illustrations to *Edwin Drood*, an equally sinister and queer novel, and deeply influenced in many ways by Collins, show how dramatically the Dickens world had by then absorbed the visual codes of the new modern-life aesthetic as it was refracted through the sensation novel.

In Collins, on the other hand, what is visible on the surface is an eerily incomplete and sometimes apparently motionless landscape, where signs of change are omnipresent but the *processes* of change are subterranean and mysterious. The modern world looks unfinished – especially the houses and streets – and unused: in a permanently suspended state of transition from the old to the new. But that cataclysmic social change has been internalised and made secret: in the entanglements of the law, the silent movements of money, the violence of marriage, and the shattering of the

nerves. The deceptive blandness of its stove-top hats, crinolines and check trousers hides a violent suppression of difference, an effect of commodification, rationalisation, and standardisation in capitalism, consent in politics and class relations, Puritanism in religion, and respectability in everyday life. The evacuation of meaning from character to plot in the sensation novel implies that protagonists are rarely able to act openly or freely, except where they are extraordinary or unusually diabolical or powerful figures. Only villains and aliens are fully and vividly realised, genuinely alive. Ordinary English men and women, on the other hand (typically, young people born into prosperity and serenity) are scarily passive, and turn out to be shell-shocked victims, mysteriously preyed upon and thrust into a world of fringe-dwellers: servants, the insane, half-castes, opium eaters, fanatics, criminals.

In doing so, Collins ushered a whole class of social outsiders to the centre of the English novel on the pretext of implicating them in the crisis of modern civilisation. Was this the achievement of a social radical and artistic innovator posing as a mere purveyor of popular entertainment? There is no simple answer to that question. Collins was an unconventional person who lived unconventionally, and who could, in his journalism at least, 'be sweepingly and unnecessarily offensive to the middle class'.²⁸ But he was not an intellectual, and there is little surviving evidence to show what he thought about any of the most important social and political issues of the day (perhaps his letters to Dickens, which the latter destroyed, revealed something of his opinions). In his youth he had clearly felt himself to be a political radical. In the early 1850s he became close to Edward Pigott, a longstanding friend whom he met at Lincoln's Inn; and between 1852 and 1855 he wrote reviews for Pigott's ultra-radical newspaper, *The Leader*, which had been set up in 1850 by G. H. Lewes and Thornton Hunt. Lewes and Hunt were freethinkers who espoused socialism, open marriage, atheism and other progressive causes, but they had fallen out when Hunt, true to his principles, took up with Lewes's wife (Lewes eloped with Marian Evans in 1855). Pigott took over the newspaper at that time.

From the tenor of Collins's letters to him, the former enthusiastically involved himself in the running of the *Leader*, though there is little to show that he was anything like as radical as his colleagues. His remarks on socialism in one letter, for example, are neutral and betray no political convictions. When the subject of religion came up, moreover, Collins, who was not conventionally religious, took issue with the radical tactics of the paper. 'Our Saviour's name' is 'something too sacred for introduction into articles on the political squabbles and difficulties of the day', he protested to

Pigott in April 1852, and thereafter he refused to have his contributions signed. It may have been that Collins was writing *Basil* and did not wish to harm its chances by having its authorship linked to the *Leader*.²⁹ Or, what is more likely, his unconventionality was not aggressive or confrontational. As he wrote to Pigott, 'I hate controversies on paper, almost more than I hate controversies in talk.'³⁰

The same abhorrence of open controversy informed Collins's otherwise puzzling reaction to Pre-Raphaelitism in the early 1850s. Under cover of anonymity, he reviewed the 1851 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition where, alongside Millais's *Mariana* and Holman Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia*, his brother Charley showed *Convent Thoughts*, his major contribution to the PRB (who would never fully admit him as a Brother). This was the painting that led Ruskin to a spirited defence of the Pre-Raphaelites in a letter to *The Times*, where he praised its minute botanical truthfulness: a crucial turning point in Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, as Tim Barringer points out, leading the group away from 'the distortions and abstractions of the early, medievalising works' and towards a new resolve to paint truthfully from nature.³¹ Wilkie Collins was not so sure. His own idea of art had been shaped precisely by Raphaelitism – he had been deeply impressed by a long stay in Italy with his family as a boy, and later letters home to his mother from Europe indicate his preference for historical painting. He had also exhibited a picture himself at the Royal Academy annual summer show two years earlier in 1849. It has never been described, so it is not known whether it was a conventional genre picture with figures, but its title, *The Smuggler's Retreat*, indicates that even if it were a landscape Collins wanted it to be read through the anecdotal tradition of the English school. Moreover, in 1851 the Royal Academy was open to 'the vast congregation of foreigners assembling in London' for the Great Exhibition. Just as the supremacy of British industry and institutions was on show at the Crystal Palace, here was an opportunity, Collins wrote, for visitors to 'learn for the first time what the English School of Painting really is – . . . [and] what our English artists really can do'.³² In this context, Collins is intent on repatriating the Pre-Raphaelites to the English school. He summarises their style as 'an almost painful minuteness of finish and detail [and] a disregard of the ordinary rules of composition and colour' and notes disapprovingly their 'evident intention of not appealing to any popular predilections on the subject of grace or beauty'.³³ He concludes that these angry young men will soon grow out of their rebelliousness:

they are as yet only emerging from the darkness to the true light; . . . they are at the critical turning point of their career; and . . . , on the course they are now

to take, on their renunciation of certain false principles in their present practice, depends our chance of gladly welcoming them, one day, as masters of their art – as worthy successors of the greatest among their predecessors in the English school.³⁴

For all his close personal friendships with the Pre-Raphaelites, and for all his own unconventionality, Collins simply could not understand their per-versely oppositional attitude, their refusal to concede *something* to public taste. Of Millais's *The Woodman's Daughter* he objects:

Why should not Mr. Millais have sought, as a model for his 'Woodman's Daughter,' a child with some of the bloom, the freshness, the roundness of childhood, instead of the sharp-featured little workhouse-drudge whom we see on his canvas? Would his colour have been less forcible, his drawing less true, if he had conceded thus much to public taste?³⁵

Collins's own ambition was to be a writer for all classes (which is how he characterised his father's achievement as an artist). His professionalism bred a sense of duty to his paying public, and his first-hand knowledge of the financial insecurity to which artists were always vulnerable committed him to an uncontroversial popular art. Collins's great achievement was to show that a low, popular art form was capable of extraordinary subtlety and power. He discovered that it was by giving the reading public exactly what it wanted – 'violent and thrilling action, astonishing coincidences, stereotypic heroes, heroines, and villains, much sentimentality, and virtue rewarded and vice apparently punished at the end' – that you could tell it what it did not want to hear.³⁶ For that reason, sensation fiction runs counter to the dominant narrative of the genesis of literary modernism: its motto was not *épatez les bourgeois!* but *captivez les bourgeois!* By feeding the 'diseased appetite' of the reading public for 'excitement alone',³⁷ Collins opened fiction to a degree of moral ambiguity that was unavailable to other representations of modern life in the visual arts and on the stage; and that, in turn, opened it to new artistic possibilities. It was only in the last phase of his career that didacticism got the better of him, prompting Algernon Swinburne's famous posthumous dig: 'What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?/ Some demon whispered – "Wilkie! have a mission."³⁸ In his own mind, though, perhaps Collins just saw himself as *The Woman in White's* Count Fosco: 'I say what other people only think; and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath.' Nothing of David Wilkie or William Collins about that.

NOTES

1. *Spectator*, 11 March 1850; CH, p. 40.
2. *Athenaeum*, 4 December 1852; CH, p. 47.
3. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 8, 12.
4. For detailed accounts of Collins's relationships with Caroline Graves and Martha Rudd, see Peters, and William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (1988) (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004).
5. 'W. Wilkie Collins', *Train*, June 1857; CH, p. 67.
6. *The Times* obituary, 3 November 1909, quoted in Paula Gillett, *The Victorian Painter's World* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1990), p. 72.
7. G. M. Young, *Portrait of an Age: Victorian England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 66.
8. W. Wilkie Collins, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., RA: With Selections from His Journals and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1978), II, ch. 4. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.
9. The 'great truth which the career of Mr. Collins illustrates, – that the powers of the mind, however brilliant, are never too elevated to be aided by the moral virtues of the character' (*Memoirs* II, ch. 2).
10. Richard Redgrave, *The Sheepshanks Gallery* (London, 1870), p. 4. Redgrave was a leading figure in the promulgation of the English school and was himself an important forerunner of the modern-life painters.
11. Despite the fact that, as Lionel Lambourne argues in *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 173, this picture raises 'social issues that are both complex and thought-provoking'.
12. *Athenaeum*, 1 May 1858, p. 565. Quoted in Meisel, *Realizations*, p. 379.
13. W. P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1887), I, p. 185.
14. See Meisel, *Realizations*, and Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 57.
15. Gillett, *Victorian Painter's World*, p. 82.
16. See Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan, 'Fatal Newness: Basil, Art, and the Origins of Sensation Fiction', in Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox (eds.), *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), pp. 1–33.
17. Frith, *Autobiography*, I, p. 173.
18. Julian Treuherz, *Victorian Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 106.
19. Frith, *Autobiography*, I, p. 285.
20. 'Notes on . . . the Royal Academy' (1858), in Edward T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1904), XIV, pp. 161–2.
21. Gillett, *Victorian Painter's World*, p. 8.
22. In the 1860s and early 1870s, '[f]abulously high prices were paid for pictures, periodicals exclusively devoted to art were founded, and England's major

- exhibition of contemporary art, that of the Royal Academy, caused tremendous interest and excitement each year' (Gillett, *Victorian Painter's World*, p. 13).
23. Alan Swingewood, *Cultural Theory and the Problem of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 144.
 24. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Paladin, 1970), pp. 11, 28.
 25. Henry James, 'Miss Braddon', *Nation*, 9 November 1865; *CH*, p. 123.
 26. T. S. Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens', in Ian Watt (ed.), *The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 135.
 27. Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 20.
 28. Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2001), VIII, p. 669.
 29. See Kirk Beetz, 'Wilkie Collins and the *Leader*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 15:1 (Spring 1982), 20-9, and Carolyn de la Oulton, *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).
 30. Quoted in Peters, p. 108.
 31. Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Reading the Image* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 61.
 32. Wilkie Collins, 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Bentley's Miscellany* 29:174 (1851), 617.
 33. *Ibid.*, 623.
 34. *Ibid.*, 625.
 35. *Ibid.*, 624.
 36. Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is Sensational About the Sensation Novel?', in Lyn Pykett (ed.), *Wilkie Collins, Contemporary Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 33.
 37. *Quarterly Review* 113 (April 1863), 357.
 38. *Fortnightly Review*, November 1889; *CH*, p. 262.

2

ANTHEA TRODD

The early writing

In the early spring of 1856, Wilkie Collins completed the novella *A Rogue's Life* in a pavilion in the grounds of a house in the Champs Elysées in Paris rented by Charles Dickens. At thirty-two he could look back on twelve years of writing which demonstrated an extraordinary range in genre, including four novels (one unpublished), many short fictions, some just republished in his first story collection, *After Dark* (1856), a drama, a biography, a travel book and assorted journalism. *A Rogue's Life*, a satirical narrative, written on a sickbed, parodies his own search for a secure niche in the literary world. The Rogue, son of a fashionable doctor, quits medical studies to become 'one of the young buccaneers of British Caricature; cruising about here, there and everywhere, at all my intervals of spare time, for any prize in the shape of a subject which it was possible to pick up' (ch. 2). Confined to a debtors' prison, he produces prints of prison life. Released, he becomes an unsuccessful fashionable portrait painter, until an experienced friend introduces him to the market for forging Old Masters, where demand exceeds supply, and the recent demise of the Rembrandt specialist has left a gap in the market. Evading the legal consequences of his foray into forging Rembrandts, he is briefly the secretary to a provincial literary institution, before descending, again under the guidance of a senior partner, to the forging of currency. Transported to Australia, he finally reinvents himself as a wealthy ex-convict landowner.

In this novella, which appeared in *Household Words* throughout March, Collins was both commenting on the diversity of his work, and assessing a career which had so far produced no widely recognised success. Like the Rogue, he was acutely aware of the difficulties of positioning himself in the market, and of the need to understand one's audience and be ready to adapt to their newly perceived needs. He had experimented widely, and produced a body of work which was consistently lively, innovative and sceptical of established values. He was committed to directing his fiction 'towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it', as he stressed in the