

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

WILLIAM WILKIE COLLINS

THE WOMAN
IN WHITE



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Edited with an Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

T. S. ELIOT, in seeking to express his admiration for Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, together with *Armada* and *The Moonstone*, regretted that there was no aesthetic of melodrama, a genuine art form.¹ There has been some progress since then in anatomizing melodrama,² but the critic at large continues to betray aversion and confusion; indeed, although we have ceased ostensibly to demand an absolute naturalism from even the novel, melodrama in respect of the novel is still censured as being untrue to life in its emphasis on the physical, its simplification of character and of moral issues, and its pursuit of violent sensation and particularly sensational crime.³

This is perhaps strange in a world which during 1939-45 witnessed an emphasis upon the physical, a simple moral issue, and sensational and violent crime beyond the scope of any novelist: the greatest melodrama ever staged in the history of man. In view of this curious obtuseness and of the real issue, which, as Aristotle saw long ago, is not a naturalistic truth but what is convincing, it seems all the more important to stress that *The Woman in White* is based squarely upon real events and that Collins strives throughout the novel, with remarkable success, for verisimilitude. The source of the plot, for example, as Clyde K. Hyder has convincingly deduced, was the account of the sensational Douhault lawsuit in Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres* which offers a striking parallel to every major incident in Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde's conspiracy and provides a cast who play similar roles to

¹ 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens' [1927], *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, 1945, pp. 422-32.

² See, for example, M. W. Disher, *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and Its Origins*, 1949; James L. Rosenberg, *The Context and Craft of Drama*, ed. R. W. Corrigan and J. L. Rosenberg, 1964, pp. 168-85; Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, 1965, pp. 195-218; Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama*, 1967; David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 1968; B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama*, 1968.

³ See, for example, the cases cited in Bentley, pp. 195-6, and cf. Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, 1966, pp. 272-3.

the characters in Collins's novel.¹ Furthermore, the most thrilling event in the book, the sudden *numinous* appearance of the mysterious woman in white to Walter Hartright on the lonely road from Hampstead to London, which Dickens considered one of the two most dramatic episodes in English Literature,² actually occurred in Collins's life; and we now know that the original of Anne Catherick was Caroline Elizabeth Graves who most probably became one of Collins's two mistresses.³

Wilkie Collins confirms in a letter to a friend⁴ that he found the plot for *The Woman in White* in the book of French crimes, picked up from an old bookstall in Paris, which Hyder has identified as Méjan's *Recueil des causes célèbres*; but, even more fortunately, Collins twice put on record an account of the way he composed the novel. These two accounts, an interview given to Edmund Yates and published in *The World*⁵ and an article entitled 'How I Write My Books' which appeared in *The Globe* (26 November 1887), correspond in many important details and there seems no reason to doubt them. They show once more that Collins's starting-point, 'my first proceeding', was 'my central idea—the pivot on which the story turns . . . the idea of a conspiracy in private life, in which circumstances are so handled as to rob a woman of her identity by confounding her with another woman, sufficiently like her in personal appearance to answer the wicked purpose. The destruction of her identity represents a first division of the story: the recovery of her identity marks a second division.' Collins goes on to make it clear that he proceeded from plot to character:

My central idea also suggests some of my chief characters. A clever devil must conduct the conspiracy. Male devil? or female devil? The sort of wickedness wanted seems to be a man's wickedness. Perhaps a foreign man. Count Fosco faintly shows himself to me before I know his name. I let him wait, and begin to think about the two women. They must both be innocent and both interesting. Lady Glyde dawns on me as one of the

¹ C. K. Hyder, 'Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*', *PMLA*, liv (1939), 298-9; Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, 1952, pp. 67-8.

² *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens*, K.C., 1934, p. 54.

³ Hyder, 297-8; Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography*, 1951, pp. 129-36.

⁴ Wybert Reeve, 'Recollections of Wilkie Collins', *Chamber's Journal*, ix (June 1906), 458.

⁵ Reprinted in Edmund Yates, *Celebrities at Home*, 3rd series, World Office, 1879, pp. 145-56.

innocent victims. I try to discover the other—and fail . . . The next morning, before I have been awake in my bed for more than ten minutes, my perverse brains set to work without consulting me. Poor Anne Catherick comes into the room and says, 'Try me.'

This account does not contradict what was said earlier about Collins's source, since what he found in Méjan was the role the characters would play in his story and not their traits. Of the creation of Fosco, Collins said that the Count owed his birth to the ingenuity of the crime which required a foreigner and that the 'making of him fat was an afterthought': 'I had begun to write my story, when it struck me that my villain would be commonplace, and I made him fat in opposition to the recognised type of villain. His theories concerning the vulgar clap-trap, that murder will out, are my own.' The canaries and white mice were added after his obesity: 'I thought the mice running about Fosco while he meditated on his schemes would have a fine effect' and 'the most valuable discovery of all, his admiration of Miss Halcombe, took its rise in a conviction that he would not be true to nature unless there was some weak point somewhere in his character'. Sir Percival Glyde was invented as a contrast to Fosco and as his tool, 'a weak shabby villain'. Oddly enough, Collins had much trouble with his title—Charles Dickens almost alone showing faith in 'The Woman in White' which was declared by others to be 'a vile melodramatic title that would ruin the book'. Even more curiously, Collins seems to have had most trouble with deciding on an opening, originally intending to begin at Limmeridge House with Laura, Marian, and Mr. Fairlie awaiting Walter Hartright's arrival. The author then realized he must begin with Anne Catherick but claims that it was only when he read of a lunatic who had escaped from an asylum that the present opening seized his enthusiastic imagination; and from that moment he never looked back. This would not, of course, contradict the autobiographical element in Collins's opening but develop it further. Though he does not at any time say so, it seems obvious that the news item fused with the episode in his own life.¹

It is interesting to see that, in composing the novel, Collins

¹ Perhaps Collins's difficulty was how to objectify a personal experience, and, if this was so, he found the solution in a chance reading of a newspaper as he relates. Naturally, Collins would not refer to one of what were later described as his 'intimacies'.

worked from plot to character, the usual method not only of the mystery-story writer but of all writers who found their tale upon a striking incident or series of incidents. It must not be supposed that such an author necessarily neglects his characterization. Collins, in fact, insisted in his preface of 1861 that he was not guilty of such a neglect. And, indeed, it might be contended that it is more difficult to invent characters to fit a given line of action than to derive a line of action from certain characters, since the limits inevitably placed upon invention and the demands made upon the novelist's range, experience, and insight into character could, in such a case, be extremely severe.

Fortunately, it is becoming less fashionable to decry plot, which (as fable) Aristotle once called the soul of a work, and it has become very fashionable to value structure highly. And in the construction of a mystery plot, and as a master of suspense, Collins is almost certainly unequalled. He undoubtedly learned much from Dickens in the handling of structure and characterization, but that Dickens also learned something from Collins can be seen in the masterly structure of *Great Expectations*, as compared with *A Tale of Two Cities*, and perhaps also in *Edwin Drood* so far as we can judge from a fragment. Collins, like Dickens, faced the twofold problem of producing a narrative of distinction which satisfied the demands made by both serialization and publication as a book. Concerning this, no praise of that time could have been higher than that of Dickens:

I have read this book with great care and attention. There cannot be a doubt that it is a very great advance on all your former writing, and most especially in respect of tenderness. In character it is excellent . . . I know that this is an admirable book, and that it grips the difficulties of the weekly portion and throws them in a masterly style. No one else could do it half so well. I have stopped in every chapter to notice some instance of ingenuity, or some happy turn of writing; and I am absolutely certain that you never did half so well yourself.¹

In his use of the serial 'curtain', Collins is superb. The episode concluding the twenty-sixth number, in which Hartright reads the epitaph to Lady Glyde on the tomb to discover Lady Glyde standing beside him, comes instantly to mind. But there are many others. The conclusion of the eighteenth number, for example:

Towards midnight, the summer silence was broken by the shuddering

¹ Letter to Collins (7 Jan. 1860), *Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-70*, 1903, p. 492.

of a low, melancholy wind among the trees. We all felt the sudden chill in the atmosphere; but the Count was the first to notice the stealthy rising of the wind. He stopped while he was lighting my candle for me, and held up his hand warningly:

'Listen!' he said. 'There will be a change to-morrow.'

Or the conclusion of the twentieth with its blend of sinister suggestiveness and masterly control:

It was dark and quiet. Neither moon nor stars were visible. There was a smell like rain in the still, heavy air; and I put my hand out of window. No. The rain was only threatening; it had not come yet.

Yet we wrong Collins as much as Dickens if we believe that his narrative art is directed towards the manipulation of sensation at all costs. Collins is not entirely incorrect when he claims, in his preface of 1860, that his effort was to 'keep the story always advancing, without paying the smallest attention to the series division in parts, or to the book publication in parts'. In a lesser sensation novelist the temptation would have proved irresistible to conclude a number with the incident in which Marian Halcombe collapses, as she struggles to record in her diary the terrifying threat to Laura hinted at in the interview between Sir Percival and Fosco, whereupon a postscript is added to Marian's increasingly illegible scrawl and is signed by Fosco. Yet Collins—and here, he particularly resembles Dickens—resists the temptation and lodges the Count's sinister power in an even more effective, realistic order of events, being set off by contrast with the humdrum comedy of Mr. Fairlie's narrative.

It is, of course, the thrills and suspense of *The Woman in White* which, at a first reading, compel our attention, together with the skilful structure on which this suspense most obviously depends. Only perhaps at a second reading do we become aware of the completely convincing nature of the events, characters, and world of the novel. A certain degree of verisimilitude is an aim of all serious novelists but it is all the more crucial, as a literary strategy, in works which narrate a series of unusual, extraordinary, or sensational events. We can see this strategy reflected rather crudely in the theatrical melodramas of Collins's day which went in for 'meticulously realistic sets' and in the more sophisticated techniques of science fiction (H. G. Wells, for example), of ghost

¹ Disher, pp. 175-6.

stories (Le Fanu and M. R. James), and of the mystery tale and the tale of terror and sensational crime. Here Collins is invariably a master, for the events and characters of *The Woman in White* are not only based on real occurrences and people, they *seem* to be real. And for two reasons. First, the author can achieve that 'willing suspension of disbelief' with regard to himself in his creation of an imaginary world, because he can assume a poetic faith in its existence; while he can express this faith with an infectious confidence precisely because he is confident of its similarity to the real world and to his own experience. Secondly, 'the willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of a novel's readers is produced through a steady accumulation of particulars, of circumstantial detail derived from the real world; and this detail is all the more apparent in *The Woman in White* as we become aware of the Victorian background reflected in the novel. This autobiographical and social context is, therefore, carefully recorded in the explanatory notes to this edition.

Collins's claim, in his preface of 1860, that the method of narration he uses in *The Woman in White* is entirely new is not completely accurate. True, Collins's novel antedates Browning's use of a similar method in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) by almost a decade yet, just over a decade earlier, a similar narrative method was used by Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and, as we shall see, for a reason not unconnected with melodrama.

In the preamble to *The Woman in White*, Collins himself declared:

As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence . . . the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect.

Perhaps this method reflects the inspiration Collins received from his source, the old eighteenth-century court case,¹ but it almost certainly reveals, also, the influence of the sensational trials of mid-Victorian England, all the more dramatic in that they were reported verbatim in the newspapers and frequently illustrated.

¹ As Hyder, 301, suggests.

Collins refers in the novel to one of these cases, the notorious Manning affair. No doubt too, through his interest in amateur theatricals and the plays he wrote for the Dickens circle, *The Lighthouse* (1855) and *The Frozen Deep* (1857), Collins saw the advantages of the dramatic method. Indeed, his dismissal of 'hearsay evidence', his preference for 'truth always in its most direct . . . aspect' indicates his awareness of the immediacy and verisimilitude which his method undoubtedly achieves. And, as Robert Ashley points out, Collins's choice of multiple first-person viewpoints avoids the severe restrictions which a single first-person narrative would have imposed on his complicated plot, compelling him to resort to the hearsay evidence he was seeking to avoid.¹

Yet there are further advantages which Collins gained from his use of this narrative method. Thus the limited viewpoints, as commentators from one of the book's earliest reviewers² onwards have pointed out, enable the author to sustain the mystery and suspense; though this is also aided by the series of interwoven secrets, instead of a single mystery, which Collins's novel steadily unravels. Again, as Collins indicates in the preface of 1860, the narrative method 'has forced me to keep the story constantly moving forward; and it has afforded my characters a new opportunity of expressing themselves, through the medium of the written contributions which they are supposed to make to the progress of the narrative'. The latter was essentially the method of the dramatic monologue which Browning had brought to perfection in *Men and Women* (1855). Furthermore, our view of a character through the varying attitudes of other characters gives the novel an extra dimension of subjective reality, and Collins also uses a device which Emily Brontë employs in *Wuthering Heights*—what Wayne C. Booth has called the device of the 'unreliable narrator'.³ The ironic self-revelation of the egocentric hypochondriac, Mr. Fairlie, and the ultra-respectable, shabby-genteel, evangelical Mrs. Michelson no doubt affords satirical amusement, but it also directs attention to an important fact. Early in the novel even Marian Halcombe had been taken in by Count Fosco; her favourable impression of him, despite her belief that fat men do commit atrocious crimes, is skilful ironic foreshadowing of the truth about the Count. But when the Count has been exposed

¹ Ashley, p. 69. ² *The Times* (30 Oct. 1860).

³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961.

through Marian's diary, the fact that Mr. Fairlie and Mrs. Michelson continue to be taken in by the Count lends renewed conviction to Fosco's pose as an innocent and delightful person, to his power and skill in deception. Immediacy and verisimilitude are crucial in great melodrama.

There is a final advantage in Collins's method which has not, so far as I am aware, been noted; yet it is an advantage which Emily Brontë also makes use of in *Wuthering Heights*. Collins's action, like that of Emily Brontë, is essentially Romantic: it is sensational, even violent, and though not unusual in the intensity of its passions, as *Wuthering Heights* certainly is, it is unusual like Emily Brontë's novel in its choice of events; for crime is a matter of daily report, admittedly, but not of everyday *personal* experience. Nevertheless, despite his Romantic, sensational, and violent subject-matter, Collins does not on the whole present theatrical characters posturing in a circle of stage fire. Such a character as Fosco, for example, either dramatizes himself directly (the Count's grandiloquent confession, for instance, is a minor dramatic masterpiece), or his theatricality is established as an objective fact by other characters, as Fosco's theatricality is commented on by Marian Halcombe,¹ or melodramatic character and action are refracted through the minds of other characters. The very ordinariness, even colourlessness, of Hartright, as well as the level-headedness of Marian, are vital factors here since these two narrators relate the greatest part of the story. The effect on the novel of this refraction through Marian Halcombe and Hartright is twofold. First, it makes the action more credible since the minds which perceive it are, apart from the sexual Romanticism of Hartright, essentially down-to-earth. Secondly, while the action may be given immediacy through its refraction, it may also, paradoxically, be distanced. Thus Hartright's account of Marian's report of Count Fosco's final swaggering interview with her² is certainly given immediacy through the strong aversion she expresses, but it is also distanced, being an account twice removed, and is moreover given objective validity through Marian. Collins does not seem to impose his melodramatic posturing villain on us. The Count does not appear to impose on the reader. The Count seeks to impose on Marian while her censure of his posturing establishes it as a more credible fact.

¹ p. 508.

² pp. 505-8.

Melodrama has frequently been criticized because it concentrates on a world of external action from which internal drama is either banished entirely or admitted only in the form of simple conventional insight into the inner life of man. Collins's bold narrative method removes the external world of action to an inner stage within the minds of his characters and the action is coloured, often quite subtly, by their consciousness. This is not Henry James, of course, nor need it be; for we mistake art, not to speak of life, if we restrict consciousness to the labyrinths of an introspective ratiocination or rationalization. The point is surely that Collins does achieve a subjective dimension while relating a tale of action. Furthermore, much of the collision in the story is genuinely dramatic rather than theatrical since it takes its shape from character. The duel between Marian and Count Fosco is of this nature, all the more impressive because of the skill and tenacity, the moral and immoral resources, of the contestants.

✓ Melodrama has also been condemned for its simple, rigid, and extreme moral vision. Yet the grave criminal act is the one to which, *as an act*, we are surely right to apply a black-and-white set of values, and the more monstrous or vile such an act the more certain this becomes. Extenuating circumstances may go some way towards excusing the criminal yet never the act itself, and the woolly-minded confusion between the two may well have helped to sanction the enormous and cruel violence of our century. Indeed, many of our modern intellectuals, if they do not share the delusions of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, yet avert their eyes from the melodrama of crime, precisely because it offends their faith in the complex and relative nature of things. Collins, however, does not confuse the criminal with the crime; while he humanizes his villains and even allows for a certain ambivalence towards the Count, he never exonerates evil deeds.

Collins's mentor and his most sympathetic admirer, Dickens, criticized the characterization of *The Woman in White* in one respect: '... the three people who write the narratives in these proofs have a DISSECTIVE property in common, which is essentially not theirs but yours; and that my own effort would be to strike more of what is got *that way* out of them by collision with one another, and by the working of the story.'¹ What Dickens says is undoubtedly true, and yet we might defend Collins on two counts.

¹ *Letters of Dickens*, p. 492.

First, it is hardly surprising or improbable that the analytical faculties of characters should be sharpened when they are beset by a world of mysteries, any more than that men's political faculties should be aroused, say, at a time of political upheaval. Secondly, since there is an obvious tendency for a novel related by several narrators to fall apart, the authorial voice or tone which helps to hold together any novel can express itself in the novel of multiple viewpoint only with a certain artificiality. Certainly, in reading Shakespeare, we do not complain when the characters show a partiality for blank verse and rhetorical figures, though the naturalism we have come to expect from the novel is a serious stumbling-block to the unwary. Collins protests, in his preface of 1861, that he is concerned with the creation of character:

I have always held the old-fashioned opinion that the primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story; and I have never believed that the novelist who properly performed this first condition of his art, was in danger, on that account, of neglecting the delineation of character—for this plain reason, that the effect produced by any narrative of events is essentially dependent, not on the events themselves, but on the human interest which is directly connected with them. It may be possible, in novel-writing, to present characters successfully without telling a story; but it is not possible to tell a story successfully without presenting characters: their existence, as recognisable realities, being the sole condition on which the story can be effectively told. The only narrative which can hope to lay a strong hold on the attention of readers is a narrative which interests them about men and women—for the perfectly-obvious reason that they are men and women themselves.

The reception accorded to 'The Woman in White' has practically confirmed these opinions.

Collins is right to be sensitive about the matter, for nothing condemns melodrama more conclusively in the eyes of the sophisticated than pasteboard figures and the blatant convention of hero, heroine, and villain.

Yet *The Woman in White* is a novel with two heroines and two villains, though we shall see in a moment why there is a single hero. Even the most complex of literary characters, Hamlet or Raskolnikov for example, is a highly selective picture of personality; and in literature we frequently find segments of human personality rather than complete characters in the realistic sense. An age of divided beings, such as the Victorian, encourages the tendency towards the fragmentation of character in literature; but the ten-

dency of the great writer towards wholeness produces both a reflection of his own age and a counter-movement. For, while such a writer presents the dissociation of personality in his cast, he presents it through the dramatic collision of the fragments which go towards making up a single, generalized but complete human personality. What we have here is not allegory but psycho-drama, for its meaning is not overt. But it is in such a manner that a writer presents both the social truth of his time yet restores to his work, albeit it unconsciously, an approximation to the total psychological realism that his age denies.

Certainly, Collins's characters and some of their basic situations can be traced back to the conventions of over half a century of melodrama.¹ The persecution and incarceration of the heroine (both Anne Catherick and Lady Glyde are unjustly shut up in a lunatic asylum and pursued by the constant threat of further incarceration when they escape) goes back to the dungeon motif in the Gothic strand of popular melodrama. Similarly, Hartright's social predicament with regard to Laura derives from the motif of the oppressed hero of lowly birth. This, itself, and the fact that the two villains of *The Woman in White* are a baronet and a count, belong to the tradition of the aristocratic villain which reflects the democratic strain in popular melodrama.

Granted the conventional basis of his melodramatic materials, Collins, however, transmutes them into the substance of a genuine, sophisticated work of art. Like Dickens, he is essentially a Romantic imposing his vision of the world on his readers through the strategy of realism. And as Dickens realizes the eternal life and truth of the archetypes of myth and fairytale in his panorama of the contemporary world, so Collins expresses the enduring truth which resides in melodrama through a living reality drawn from his time, fusing the antagonistic modes of sensationalism, of social protest and satire, and of domestic realism in a perfect blend.

Thus, we mistake Laura Fairlie if we see in her only the legless angel of Victorian convention. Conventional she certainly is, but it is her very conventionality which marks her contemporary social realism. Sexless she may seem to us, yet not to the Victorian middle-class reader. Indeed, what are, to us, her drawbacks, her very purity and her passive, helpless, shrinking, feminine being,

¹ For the conventions and tradition of melodrama, see Dishar, *passim*, esp. pp. 30-1, 34-9, 51-6, 84-5, 180-1, 206-7, 213.

provide for the Victorian the height of sex-appeal, an appeal which Thackeray, the great Victorian realist of *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), confessed he could not resist when he created Dobbin and his Amelia.¹ Nevertheless, Laura, like Amelia, reflects a Romantic ideal—a *persona*, striving, as so many nineteenth-century middle-class women apparently did,² to live out only a part of female nature. And Collins presents the other aspect of female being, the shadow side of the Victorian woman, in Marian Halcombe his second heroine. For Marian represents much that the Victorian woman and the middle-class ethos excluded from the sexual relationship. She is active, intelligent, with almost a masculine will. Discreetly, she is made ugly and remains a spinster, and yet Collins can scarcely conceal her profound love for Hartright, and his for her, behind the screen of a platonic affection. Significantly, it is only Marian's face that is ugly; the discrepancy between her face and her beautiful figure reflects the dissociation between sexual feeling and the sexual instinct, as it centres on the facts of life, which seems to have characterized the overt Victorian attitude to the sexual nature of woman, the classic case being that of John Ruskin and Effie Gray. Overtly, that is, and in contrast with the pretty-faced Laura Fairlie—in Hartright's description of his water-colour drawing of Laura, the face is eulogized at the expense of all else³—Marian is unattractive, yet that other nether-face of sexuality, with other lips and other cheeks, which is secretly displaced upwards in Marian's form, is at once both ugly and attractive; body and face are unconsciously reversed in such a way as to conceal yet betray the true state of things. More important still, we can see now why there are two heroines in the novel but only one hero, for Collins achieves psychological validity with this trio by representing in Victorian terms what have been called the *anima* and the *shadow*,⁴ that is, here, the Victorian male's idealized image of woman together with much of a contradictory nature that

¹ See Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, 1957, reprinted 1963, pp. 348-93, and cf. *Vanity Fair*, ed. Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson, 1963, chs. xii, xxxviii, xliii, pp. 108-9, 377-8, 421-2.

² Houghton, pp. 348-72; Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 1970, pp. 29-33; Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Angel-Makers*, 1958, pp. 97-106.

³ pp. 40-1.

⁴ C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, 1953, pp. 94, 108, 186-239; *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959, pp. 54-72; *Aion*, 1959, pp. 8-22. All three tr. R. F. C. Hull.

is excluded from that ideal. Collins, the man who later lived with two women, depicts a hero who experiences the dual nature of woman:

Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady's [Marian's] complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly-shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream . . . A fair, delicate girl [Laura], in a pretty light dress, trifling with the leaves of a sketch-book, while she looks up from it with truthful innocent blue eyes—that is all the drawing can say; all, perhaps, that even the deeper reach of thought and pen can say in their language, either. The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared. Sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts, are touched, at such times, by other charms than those which the senses feel and which the resources of expression can realise. The mystery which underlies the beauty of women is never raised above the reach of all expression until it has claimed kindred with the deeper mystery in our own souls. . . . The days passed on, the weeks passed on . . . afternoons and evenings spent, day after day and week after week, alone in the society of two women, one of whom possessed all the accomplishments of grace, wit, and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth, that can purify and subdue the heart of man.¹

We can see here, again, the wise instinct in Collins's method of narration. Laura is not allowed to speak in her own person and much of what we see of her and of Marian is from the fairly ordinary Walter Hartright's point of view—from the normal Victorian

¹ pp. 25, 41-2, 53-4.

middle-class male's Romantic standpoint. It is convincing if we read it correctly, even objectively rendered in its very subjectivity, for the Victorians had superimposed a subjective image upon an objective social situation. It is to Collins's credit that he shows some awareness of complementary truths, and quite refreshing to find that he does not mock or criticize the active spinster as Dickens, Thackeray, and even George Eliot are apt to do.¹

If Marian Halcombe is one great triumph of Collins's novel, Count Fosco has long been recognized as the other. Yet it has not been appreciated that Fosco is there for the same general purpose as Marian, to give credibility to the fictional world of *The Woman in White*. We cannot, of course, know what the book would have been without Fosco and Marian but we cannot assume that Laura and Sir Percival Glyde would have been as convincing. It is significant that just as Laura scarcely ever appears in the novel without Marian, so Sir Percival rarely appears apart from the Count. We have Collins's own word for it that Fosco originated in Collins's desire for verisimilitude, in his realization that the major crime in the book was too ingenious for an English villain. Yet the Count's role in helping to create a convincing fictional world goes far beyond this. As Collins also says, Sir Percival is 'a weak shabby villain'. As such, he is clearly a foil for Fosco who is the very reverse, strong and flamboyant. But there is more in this than Collins's simply offsetting these two characters. For, through both Fosco and Sir Percival, Collins is able to represent the dual nature of the criminal, his social and psychological validity, and to focus the ambivalent attitude of the reader, since, as Baudelaire points out, the 'hypocrite lecteur' is himself a criminal, if only in his fantasies.²

Sir Percival is the wicked plotting squire who seeks possession of the desirable female and her fortune; yet through his development of this conventional figure, Collins insists on the moral weakness, the guilt-ridden furtiveness and squalid meanness of the criminal (here, forger, imposter, and conspirator), his uncontrollable temper and crude brutality. Through Fosco, the author shows us the other side, the enormous vanity, arrogance, and self-deception of the criminal, his self-dramatization and flamboyant posturing, his revelling in conspiratorial excitement,

¹ See, for example, Rachael Wardle in *Pickwick Papers*, Glorvina O'Dowd in *Vanity Fair*, and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*.

² Charles Baudelaire, 'Au lecteur', 1855; 'Preface', *Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857.