



CENTRO INTERNACIONAL DE ESTUDOS
DE DOUTORAMENTO E AVANZADOS
DA USC (CIEDUS)

TESE DE DOUTORAMENTO

THE PROGRESS OF TASTE IN MID-NINETEENTH
CENTURY ENGLAND: ART IN WILKIE COLLINS'
EARLY WRITING

Julián Díaz Martínez

ESCOLA DE DOUTORAMENTO INTERNACIONAL

PROGRAMA DE DOUTORAMENTO EN ESTUDOS INGLESES

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA / LUGO

ANO 2020



AUTORIZACIÓN DO DIRECTOR /TITOR DA TESE
THE PROGRESS OF TASTE IN MID-NINETEENTH
CENTURY ENGLAND: ART IN WILKIE COLLINS'
EARLY WRITING

D./Dna. Jorge Sacido Romero

(Se hai máis dun director/a, duplique este parágrafo)

INFORMA/N:

Que a presente tese, correspóndese co traballo realizado por D/Dna. Julián Díaz Martínez, baixo a miña dirección, e autorizo a súa presentación, considerando que reúne os requisitos esixidos no Regulamento de Estudos de Doutoramento da USC, e que como director desta non incorre nas causas de abstención establecidas na Lei 40/2015.

En, ... de de 20...

Asdo.....

(Se hai máis dun director/a,
duplique este cadro)



DECLARACIÓN DO AUTOR/A DA TESE

**THE PROGRESS OF TASTE IN MID-NINETEENTH
CENTURY ENGLAND: ART IN WILKIE COLLINS'
EARLY WRITING**

D./Dna. Julián Díaz Martínez

Presento a miña tese, seguindo o procedemento axeitado ao Regulamento, e declaro que:

- 1) A tese abranxe os resultados da elaboración do meu traballo.
- 2) De selo caso, na tese faise referencia ás colaboracións que tivo este traballo.
- 3) A tese é a versión definitiva presentada para a súa defensa e coincide coa versión enviada en formato electrónico.
- 4) Confirmo que a tese non incorre en ningún tipo de plaxio doutros autores nin de traballos presentados por min para a obtención doutros títulos.

En Londres, 22 de decembro de 2019

Asdo.....

ABSTRACT

This dissertation shows the extent to which Wilkie Collins reflected the changing mid-Victorian perceptions on aesthetic discrimination in his early body of work. A producer of literary commodities for a middle-class public, Collins had an acute understanding of the pivotal changes brought by capitalist development in what concerned the acquisition of taste: once a matter restricted to a selected few and now, as his career in the field of letters progressed, a right demanded by many. Following a close reading of his literary production, essays and correspondence during the 1850s, Collins emerges as an author thoroughly aware of the democratisation of taste that pervaded a crucial decade of the nineteenth century.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 FIRST STEPS.....	11
1.1 “A WRITER BY PROFESSION”.....	15
1.2 THE NOVEL STYLE OF PAINTING.....	20
CHAPTER 2 <i>BASIL: A STORY OF MODERN LIFE</i> (1852).....	37
2.1 THAT SUSPICIOUS GLARE.....	48
2.2 PRECIOUS STUFFS.....	65
2.3 COVETABLE THINGS.....	74
CHAPTER 3 A CHANGING ARTISTIC LANDSCAPE: <i>HIDE AND SEEK</i> (1854) AND <i>A ROGUE’S LIFE</i> (1856).....	89
3.1 OLD MASTERS AND NEW PATRONS.....	91
3.2 MERCHANT PRINCES.....	98
CHAPTER 4 “TO THINK, OR BE THOUGHT FOR?” (1856).....	107
4.1 ART FOR THE PEOPLE.....	109
4.2 THE FORGOTTEN POPULAR SYMPATHY.....	117
CHAPTER 5 “THE UNKNOWN PUBLIC” (1858).....	129
5.1 THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE MANY.....	130
5.2 CHEAP KNOWLEDGE.....	142
5.3 THAT UNBOUND PICTURE QUARTO.....	148
5.4 THE MARCH OF THE TIMES.....	161
5.5 OF PROGRESS AND ENGLISHMEN.....	170
CHAPTER 6 <i>THE WOMAN IN WHITE</i> (1859-1860).....	179
6.1 A COMPLEX JIGSAW.....	181
6.2 FATHER OF SENSATION FICTION.....	192
6.3 AN APPRECIATOR OF THE BEAUTIFUL.....	203
6.4 THE CULT OF BEAUTY.....	210
6.5 THE MILLION’S TASTE.....	221

6.6 MODERN BARBARIANS.....	235
6.7 MADONNA.....	243
6.7.1 A DELIGHTFUL CONCEPTION.....	248
6.7.2 RAPHAEL’S POETRY.....	256
6.7.3 OF MEN AND BEAUTY.....	262
CONCLUSION.....	273
WORKS CITED.....	285
RESUMO.....	303

To the Breton boy. πάντα ρεῖ.

INTRODUCTION

I saw this morning a very fine picture of
Raffaello of a Madonna and Bambino.
(Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Letters of Sir Joshua
Reynolds* 1786)

The century we live in is not merely
remarkable for its railways and marvels
of science than for a re-action from
preceding barbarism in matters of taste.
(Rev. H. Wellesley, *Quarterly Review* 1844)

Wilkie Collins has been qualified by past and current criticism as a mere producer of literary commodities for the entertainment of a middle-class nineteenth century market. Admittedly, critics have argued, some of Collins' novels exhibit quite a remarkable degree of literary craftsmanship but, overall, his books are far from being literary masterpieces, their faults accumulating: one dimensional characters, excessive reliance on random circumstances or incongruity of the plots are some of the commonest complaints mounted upon them. Collins, in short, did not reach the literary heights of other colleagues in the literary marketplace. At his best, he produced a remarkable book, *The Moonstone* (1868), arguably the first modern detective novel. And that was all. Collins, as *The Athenaeum* wrote in the 1870s, "writes with no other object than to amuse; and—judged by his object—he achieves a substantial success" (qtd. in Page 194). Collins belonged to the league of minor players of Victorian literature, a shadow cast upon him by those with better literary skills. His works, as T. S. Eliot wrote, only appealed to those who enjoyed "reading novels" (171). Anyone wishing for some kind of artistry, Eliot argued, was to be disappointed by Collins. He was simply not good enough. A skilled craftsman, true, but not an artist. Collins, according to H. F. Chorley, delighted way too much "in the intricacies of incident" (qtd. in Page 133) to be taken seriously. Or, as the *Saturday Review* put it, "he never rises above a machinist" (qtd. in Page 77). It was a complaint that persisted through most of Collins' long career in the field of letters. However, such assessment, I maintain, belittles Collins' literary achievements. From *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) to *The Moonstone* (1868), not forgetting *No Name* (1862) and *Armada* (1864-1866), arguably his most carefully constructed novel, the complexity of Collins' plots and characters stands by their own. From supercilious aesthetes to alluring femme fatales, not

forgetting cunning scoundrels devoid of the most elemental morality, Collins' fiction worked as a distorted mirror of nineteenth century society, pushing moral conventions to the limit. A master of melodrama he might be, but in his hands the genre reached the heights of an art form.

Unafraid of convention as Collins was—certainly as unafraid as any professional of the pen could be working in the field of letters during the mid-nineteenth century—it is often forgotten that, at the peak of his literary career, Collins' success equalled that of Charles Dickens. The publication of *Armadale* (1864-1866) earned the former £5000, an enormous amount of money only reached by very few writers at the time. The 1860s were certainly the golden years for Collins, a time of big commercial success and *joie de vivre*. But Collins had already quite an extensive body of work previous to *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), his first great success in the literary marketplace and the book that made of him a household name amongst mid-century readers. As Catherine Peters writes in her biography *The King of Inventors* (1992), “[t]o the public at large, Wilkie Collins was the author of a series of dark, intense, shocking, but highly entertaining novels, guaranteed to bring a blush to the cheek of the Young Person” (3); which is true, to a point. Contrary to what the stress on the commercial value of his works may lead us to believe, Collins' early writings show a man quite aware of the extraordinary changes the society of the time was going through. Mingling either with the bohemia of the moment, that is, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, or the much more respectable circle around Dickens, Collins was far from being an absent-minded spectator from the debates and actions that shaped a pivotal decade in nineteenth-century history. Following Tim Dolin, “Collins' early years in the art world were vital in laying the foundations for his success—and failures—in the literary, journalistic and theatrical worlds” (10). However, these early years, crucial as they were for Collins' development as a professional of the pen, have been overshadowed by the success of his later novels. This is a regrettable omission. Collins' involvement with the mid-century art world proved fruitful indeed: the way painting and literature were consumed in a burgeoning commodity culture turned into a subject of endless fascination for the young writer. As my research will show, against the aristocratic understanding of taste rooted in the past century, Collins supported—not without reservations—a democratic

approach to art dismissive of tradition and grounded on day-to-day reality that echoed the aesthetic proposed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Articles like “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), “The National Gallery and the Old Masters” (1856) and “The Unknown Public” (1858), amongst others, show Collins’ acute perception of a new understanding of art appreciation as a democratic right that inevitably threatened the grip on aesthetic matters exerted by a limited group of connoisseurs. The present dissertation examines, following a strict chronological approach, how this new understanding permeates Collins’ early body of work culminating with the serialisation of *The Woman in White* (1859-1860).¹

A producer of literary commodities for a middle-class market, Collins developed his professional career surrounded by what N. N. Feltes in *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (1986) called “the petty-commodity production of books” (3). Indeed, the capitalist production of texts mean a radical change in the consumption and production of literature from which men like Collins greatly benefited.² Fiction was at the mid-nineteenth century “merely another aspect of commodity production” playing a crucial function in what Terry Eagleton called the General Mode of Production, that is, a mode of production characterised by “a unity of certain forces and social relations of material production” (*Criticism and Ideology* 45-49). According to Eagleton, “[t]he literary producer stands in a certain social relation to his consumers which is mediated by his social relations to the patrons, publishers and distributors of his product” becoming a “petty-bourgeois producer” (*Criticism and Ideology* 50-51). Such was the case with professionals of the pen like Collins. To my mind, Eagleton’s understanding of the new relations of production-consumption clearly influenced Feltes’ notion of the commodity-text, a text “produced by a writer within a determinate capitalist mode, a structure of specific means and relations of production, in which the series provides the distinctive form of control, and in which the profits are made by the ever more inevitable interpellation of a mass bourgeois audience” (10). Feltes’ understanding of the commodity-text proved extremely useful to me when approaching Collins’ early body of work. The latter, it is worth bearing in mind, was one of many men (and women) earning a living through writing in mid-century England. Consequently, Collins was thoroughly dependent on his audience to

¹ This dissertation follows the guidelines set by the MLA Handbook (8th edition).

² For a more detailed account of this change see Feltes 3-9.

get a profit from the product of his imagination. As Bill Bell put it, “Victorian authors ... found themselves operating within a complex network of formal constraints, constraints tied in very explicit ways to socioeconomic imperatives” (127). Collins, to his credit, was perfectly aware of these constraints throughout his long professional career. The capitalist mode of production aforementioned thoroughly conditioned the development of mid-nineteenth century fiction. I fully agree with Raymond Williams when he links “the development of the novel as a literary form” to “the highly specific economics of fiction publication” (*Marxism and Literature* 137). However, contrary to Williams’ assertion of that development happening in the 1890s, from my point of view Collins’ career as a professional writer in the 1850s plainly shows how “the economics of fiction publication” were already affecting the development of English literature well before the last decades of the century. I do not intent to apply a Marxist cultural sociology of sorts to my study of Collins’ early body of work, but it is obvious that any professional writer in the field of letters during the mid-nineteenth century was conditioned by the peculiarities of the English market of books. Literature, as a cultural activity, was part of a complex mechanism of production, distribution and consumption thoroughly dependent upon each other. Thus, my main concern being the study of the way Collins reflected the changing mid-century perceptions upon taste in his early writings, it is imperative to pay attention to the sociocultural and material environment around him. Collins’ first attempts in the literary marketplace, I will argue, allow us to approach a pivotal moment of nineteenth century history through the lenses of a man deeply entangled with the cultured circles of the metropolis and well aware of his professional standing in the field of letters. Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), the novel that made of him a famous writer, must be approached bearing in mind the strong opinions of the author on aesthetic consumption as reflected in his previous body of work. A close reading of Collins’ early novels, articles and correspondence, shows how *The Woman in White* further developed (and refined) issues already dealt with in past writings. Obviously, this kind of reading involves the contextualisation of a literary output published during one of the most transformative decades of the nineteenth century. The quick spread of capitalist development prompted an acceleration in the commodification of the arts never seen before that entailed the development of a project of aesthetic democracy endorsed by Collins. Siding with the many instead of the few in the fight

for the control of the rule of taste that emerged as the mid-century progressed, Collins' early writings, to my mind, show the extent to which art appreciation was being challenged by a growing commercial society dismissive of inherited opinions on aesthetic matters and bold enough to favour independence of thought regarding taste discernment. Not surprisingly, the consequences of such defiance were to reverberate in decades to come.

Following Walter Hamilton's classic book *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), the origin of the term aesthetic can be traced back to the ancient Greek word for perception, *aesthesis*, meaning "the science of the beautiful, especially in art, and the designation has long been applied by German writers to a branch of philosophical enquiry into the theory of the beautiful, or more accurately, into the philosophy of poetry and the fine arts" (vi). Indeed, such application did not escape the attention of the Germanophile Thomas Carlyle, whose writings were widely read amongst Oxford students during the 1840s.³ Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1839) propounded the creation of a small group devoted to a very particular idea of culture of his own, an amalgam resulting from "the body of arts and learning" as well as "a body of values superior to the ordinary progress of society" (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 96) that echoed the thesis expounded by Friedrich Schiller in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795). Schiller had posited the "aesthetic state" as the only policy possible to maintain the cohesiveness of society after the crumbling of the old regime in France. In this peculiar state, "taste leads knowledge out into the broad daylight of Common Sense [*Gemeinsinn*], and transforms a monopoly of the Schools into the common possession [*Gemeingut*] of Human Society as a whole" (qtd. in Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* xi). Schiller understood the urgency for an anchor in a world shaken to the core by the tide of political uprisings sweeping the Continent. Century-old beliefs proved remarkable fragile as the eighteenth century was drawing to a close. Maybe the development of a better understanding of the beautiful could help to heal the wounds of a society bereft of moral authority. Schiller's argument reverberated in Carlyle's book. The latter, living at the very beginning of

³ Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750) is widely credited as having coined "aesthetic" as the science of sensory cognition. In what concerns English literature, an early usage of the word aesthetics is registered in Coleridge during the 1820s. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords* 28.

the Victorian era, immediately realised the tremendous changes brought by capitalist development on the social body of the country. Values of a superior order were indeed urgently needed in a time of seemingly unstoppable progress. However, as years went by, the application of a taste traditionally circumscribed to the wealthy classes to the amorphous body of a burgeoning capitalist society based on social inequality posited a conundrum of difficult solution that pervaded the development of nineteenth century aesthetic thought. As this dissertation will show, Collins, starting his literary career in a time when the democratisation of waste was gaining momentum, best captured this changing cultural and social landscape in his early body of work.

Needless to say, the scope of my research, a decade that goes from 1849 when Collins published the biography of his deceased father to 1859 when *The Woman in White* started serialisation, does not entail disregarding a literary output that reaches well until the last decade of the century and that includes an extensive correspondence as well as a plethora of essays for different magazines. As Graham Law quite rightly pointed out, “from its beginnings amid the vestiges of the patronage system to the clear signs of the rise of a mass fiction market accompanying its close, the literary career of Wilkie Collins offers extraordinary insights into contemporary developments in print-capitalism” (“The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace” 99). It is precisely on Collins’ very beginnings where my research focuses. Bearing in mind his long career in the field of letters, some of Collins’ early concerns inevitably do still resonate in later articles and novels. But, from my point of view, *The Woman in White* culminates a decade of rumination on aesthetic matters that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been thoroughly approached as a whole before. Tim Dolin’s article “Collins’s Career and the Visual Arts” (2006) provides a valuable, although I think superficial, approach similar to the one given by Anthea Trodd’s “The Early Writing” (2006). Trodd fails to delve deeper into her subject with Collins’ “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858) getting a passing remark as an attack on the low standards in English theatres and not even mentioning “Deep Design in Society” (1858) despite being an important sociological analysis of the mid-century by Collins. Actually, both articles need to be apprehended with “The Unknown Public” (1858) in mind. Collins’ views on art appreciation were succinctly summarised by Ellen Moers in her classic book *The Dandy* (1960): “Conversant with the Pre-Raphaelite group, Collins set a high

value on the plastic arts, talked a theory of aestheticism and idealised the practice of dilettantism, or what he once called the ‘dandy-dilettante sort of life’”, Moers wrote. “The connection between aestheticism and dandyism,” she added, “that came to England from mid-century France to preoccupy the ‘nineties, is prefigured in one of Collins’ best villains, Miserrimus Dexter, the horrible effeminate dwarf of *The Law and the Lady* (1875)” (241-242). I do not agree with Moers’ view of Collins idealising the practice of a dilettante dandyism of sorts, neither do I agree with the connection between aestheticism and dandyism being prefigured by the delightful villain of *The Law and the Lady*. But I do believe, however, that Collins was deeply interested in the evolving nature of art appreciation, as I do believe that the aforementioned connection can be traced back to Collins’ second published novel *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852). Indeed, the young writer was quite conversant with Pre-Raphaelitism, well acquainted as he was with the members of the movement since their student days. Collins’ very first publications, as Chapter I shows, were coetaneous with the development of the brotherhood. As a matter of fact, Collins had a very particular opinion of his own regarding the real value of the Pre-Raphaelite movement not exactly concordant with the art orthodoxy of the time—an opinion further detailed, as I will show, in a mostly forgotten article on the art movement, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” (1851). As discussed in Chapter II, Collins’ *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852) evinces a deep influence of some of the main tenets of Pre-Raphaelitism and Collins’ concern for a booming commodity culture that was transforming the social body of the country. Chapter III pays attention to both *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *A Rogue’s Life* (1856), two short novels remarkably ignored by academic criticism though they deal with a changing understanding of art appreciation and lay the ground for Collins’ clearest meditation on the democratisation of taste during the mid-century, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), on which Chapter IV focuses. A remarkable piece of work that never, so far as I know, has received the attention it deserves, Collins sketched in this article the tenets of an aesthetic democracy of sorts that inevitably meant the dismissal of the high-brow taste that had ruled the cultural life of the nation for decades past. He believed that mid-century society required a new set of aesthetic values, one that could not be left in the hands of a supercilious elite of art connoisseurs. It was only a matter of time, Collins thought, for those unacquainted with aesthetic matters to learn how to discriminate and, consequently, to

assert themselves as arbiters of a new conception of taste. To his credit, how much aesthetic democratisation had advanced in past years was made clear when the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition opened its doors in 1857, hardly a year after Collins' criticism of those who thought of themselves as the only authorities in art appreciation. As I discuss at length in Chapter V, the Manchester event, an extraordinary gathering of works of art, was intended to improve the aesthetic knowledge of a growing class of consumers still devoid of the most elementary education in artistic matters. Collins devoted a remarkable, and not widely discussed, article to this new breed of consumers on the margins of cultural respectability. "The Unknown Public" (1858) was indebted to Collins' cunning understanding of the evolving commodity culture around him. Producing his fiction for a middle-class readership, he was nonetheless aware of a much bigger literary marketplace of which most of his reputed colleagues in the field of letters remained blatantly ignorant. But, disregarded as it was, Collins suspected that this unknown public living on the edges of literary respectability was to play a crucial role in the development of English literature, and, by extension, of aesthetic discrimination, as years went by. Actually, to my mind, he quite surreptitiously pushed things in that direction when appropriating tropes of the cheap literature consumed by the unknown public for his biggest, and boldest, literary endeavour up to that time. Chapter VI focuses on *The Woman in White* as the culmination of Collins' previous body of work and, therefore, deserves a longer analysis. *The Woman in White* certainly polarised the literary market. Many thought of Collins' bestseller as first-class entertainment. Others, to put it mildly, were not so kind. A literary commodity intended for a middle-class audience but heavily indebted to the less reputable fiction of the penny journals, Collins' novel, it is worth bearing in mind, was written barely two years after the Manchester event. Art appreciation was no longer deemed the exclusive property of a few but a right for the many when the first instalment of *The Woman in White* hit the newsstands. It was a tremendous change that reflected how deep the transformation of the social body of the country had been in a very short span. Collins' *The Woman in White* closes a decade that saw the success of a new democratic understanding of aesthetic consumption against the patronising attitudes of a very limited circle of connoisseurs. In this sense, the supercilious, egotistical aesthete Frederick Fairlie emerges from the pages of *The Woman in White* as a relic of a bygone time. A new breed of consumers emboldened by the

opportunities afforded by capitalist development felt more than entitled to have a say in aesthetic matters, the middle class consolidating itself in the 1850s as a force to be reckoned with. And when that happened, when the many previously excluded from the enjoyments of art discernment asserted their right to have an opinion of their own, then what the editor of *The Journal of Design and Manufactures* called “the fallacy of ‘Every one to his own taste’” (iii) stopped being just a fallacy and increasingly became an assumption. Men devoted to the contemplation of beautiful things like Frederick Fairlie were living on borrowed time in the commercial mid-century. His doomed attempt to exert a control of sorts in the aesthetic education of those devoid of the most elemental art knowledge showed the threat posited by an emboldened populace increasingly dismissive of self-appointed arbiters of taste. The ensuing conflict found in Collins an acute and prescient observer, aware as he was of living in an epoch of portentous changes. He marvelled at them. But he was also puzzled. And from that mixture of amazement and worry a remarkable portrait of mid-Victorian England emerges in his work.

1 FIRST STEPS

A new weekly journal hit the streets of London weeks before the opening of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1850. Named *Household Words*, and comprising twenty four pages priced two penny, the journal intended, in the words of his editor Charles Dickens, to become “the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look” (“A Preliminary Word” 1).⁴ Never for a moment Dickens forgot how much of his fortune was dependent on the many thousands of people making up a reading public that had sustained his literary efforts since the serialisation of *The Pickwick Papers* more than fifteen years before. Were not for the faces never looked at, the young Boz most probably would have never raised from obscurity, his skills limited to journalism and sketches of daily life. But he did. And as he climbed the ladder of literary fame, Dickens showed to many others how profitable a career in literature could become thanks to a growing reading public which allowed for the development of the professional man of letters as the nineteenth century progressed. Those devoted to the pen found in the unknown faces quite a force to be reckoned with: a new system of “patronage”, one not dependent on forlorn arbiters of taste but in the amorphous middle class, developed as the decades went by. And it was a system not without its peculiarities. Books were expensive commodities rarely purchased in Victorian England with circulating libraries providing a relatively cheap access to literature through borrowing at a low cost.⁵ The fact that most of English novels were published in three volumes best suited this very peculiar way of consuming fiction since any novel could be shared accordingly amongst several customers of a circulating library: paying an annual fee, one reader could enjoy one volume whilst the other two were being read at the same time by other subscribers.⁶ The publishers “found it more profitable to supply, say,

⁴ Dickens’ unflinching business mentality was clearly prior to the launch of *Household Words*. He was careful enough “to stipulate that he would receive half the net profits of the weekly periodical” (Nayder 18) plus an annual salary of £500 from Bradbury and Evans, the journal’s publishers.

⁵ Q. D. Leavis, in her classical book *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1968), understands the circulating library as the eighteenth-century outcome of the book clubs and subscription libraries which furnished the landed classes with literature according to their taste. For more information about the birth of the circulating libraries, see Leavis 133-138.

⁶ One guinea and a half was the standard fare at Mudie’s Select Library. Four volumes were available at two guineas, eight volumes at three, etc. For the several types of subscription at Mudie’s, see Griest 39.

five hundred copies of a new book to a few reliable customers, either directly or through jobbers, than to dispose of them one by one through the bookshops” (Altick, *The English Common Reader* 295). Charging the general public with prices established in the inflationary 1820s, the publishers left little option but to turn to these libraries to get the chance of reading a book without the inconveniences of serialisation. A pernicious system ensued where enormous quantities of newly published books were purchased by the circulating libraries at discount rates. The writer was completely powerless. Whether they liked or not, those devoted to the literary craft had to submit to the three-volume format which inevitably created “a formal literary design: in many novels the structural divisions are as clear as the three acts of a play” (Tillotson 23). Editors and owners of libraries clearly profited from a system that lasted well until the end of the century and shaped the development of nineteenth century fiction.⁷ As matters stood in the 1850s, professionals of the pen were thoroughly conditioned by the peculiarities of the English market of books. But things proved much more malleable in other fields of the arts.

The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy, no doubt the art event of the season in London, showcased once during the year the latest paintings by recognised masters and aspiring artists. Intellectuals mingled with the populace in the galleries of the Trafalgar Square building, a heterogeneous public eager to improve their art education looking at pictures. But in that year of 1850 the Exhibition gained an unexpected notoriety when the most important writer of the time turned his rage against one painting hanging from the walls of the prestigious institution.

Published in the twelfth number of *Household Words*, Dickens’ “Old Lamps for New Ones” (1850) changed the fortunes of the new style of painting known as Pre-Raphaelitism.

⁷ George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) best reflected the limitations constraining the practice of literature: “For one in my position, how is it possible to abandon the three volumes? It is a question of payment”, writes the young journalist Edwin Reardon. “An author of moderate repute may live on a yearly three-volume novel—I mean the man who is obliged to sell his book out and out, and who gets from one to two hundred pounds for it. But he would have to produce four one-volume novels to obtain the same income; and I doubt whether he could get so many published within the twelve months” (180). It was an honest, if blunt, assessment of the benefits and difficulties of the three-volume system that ruled over English literature for almost over a century and that came to an end soon after the publication of Gissing’s novel.

Both John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, two young students at the Royal Academy who formed the core of the so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, had already displayed their paintings in the previous exhibition to mild praise. But Dickens' take on Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) proved momentous. The painting, depicting the Holy Family in Joseph's workshop, was from Dickens' point of view an affront to artistic and religious conventions. Millais, Dickens wrote, had carried out a blatant rejection of "all that has been done for the happiness and elevation of mankind during three or four centuries of slow and dearly-bought amelioration" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 265). Millais was insulting his alma mater, the Royal Academy, whose core curricula was thoroughly indebted to the teachings derived from the Italian Renaissance. Even worse, his was an attitude all the more condemnable when bearing in mind how dependent were the masses on the Summer Exhibition for their art education: "We have always thought", Dickens wrote, "it would tend soundly to the improvement of the general public, if any tangible symbol, any outward and visible sign, expressive of that admirable conception [the elevation of mankind], could be held up before them" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 265). But little did care Millais for that improvement, happily ignoring as he did the legacy of the Renaissance and the school of Raphael under which the Royal Academy had built its core curricula. Indeed, the name chosen by the brethren said a great deal about their stand and interest. Maybe, Dickens argued, the master of Urbino was a "poor lamp" according to the Pre-Raphaelite credo, "fed with a preposterous idea of Beauty—with a ridiculous power of etherealising, and exalting to the very Heaven of Heavens, what was most sublime and lovely in the expression of the human face divine on Earth" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 265).⁸ Being that the case, it was a preposterousness that Dickens found enthralling. Striving to render upon a canvas a kind of beauty only attainable in heaven, Raphael's paintings were all the more commendable for that. And Millais' refusal to follow his lead shocked Dickens to the core.

⁸ To Raphael could be attributed "the truly contemptible conceit of finding in poor humanity the fallen likeness of the angels of God, and raising it up again to their pure spiritual condition" (Dickens, "Old Lamps for New Ones" 265).

“Walk up, walk up”; Dickens told his readers, “and here, conspicuous on the wall of the Royal Academy of Art in England, in the eighty-second year of their annual exhibition, you shall see what this new Holy Brotherhood, this terrible Police that is to disperse all Post-Raphael offenders, has ‘been and done!’” (“Old Lamps for New Ones” 265). What had been done by that terrible Police, according to Dickens, was nothing less than to render Christ’s childhood in the most blasphemous depiction ever imagined: “You behold the interior of a carpenter shop”, Dickens wrote about Millais’ painting:

In the foreground of that carpenter’s shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering red-headed boy, in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke in the hand from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman so horrible in her ugliness, that ... she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England. (“Old Lamps for New Ones” 265)

There was very little, if nothing at all, of the exaltation of the “very Heaven of Heavens” so characteristic of Raphael and its school of painting in Millais’ depiction of the Holy Family. Pre-Raphaelitism, at least from Dickens point of view, had clearly succeeded in its defiance of the established principles of truth and beauty. What Raphael had laboured so hard to convey upon a canvas—the true spiritual condition of humankind—was nowhere to be seen in *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Indeed, only a mockery of beauty was left in its place: “Whenever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude, you have it expressed”, denounced Dickens. “Such men as the carpenters might be undressed in any hospital where dirty drunkards, in a high state of varicose veins, are received” (“Old Lamps for New Ones” 266). Millais’ extreme realistic depiction of the Holy Family was a blatant rebuttal of the teachings taught at the Royal Academy, a very conscious rejection of tradition made with a surprising degree of contempt. Gone was the due reverence to Raphael’s skilful craft, instrumental for the development of the English School of painting. Millais, Dickens argued, had unmasked the true purpose of Pre-Raphaelitism with his portrayal of Christ’s childhood emphasising “[t]he lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting” and disregarding “all

Post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts” (“Old Lamps for New Ones” 265). To Dickens’ knowledge, Millais’ staunch adherence to reality had never before been applied in such a way to a religious painting. The editor of *Household Words* found reasons enough to be enraged. William Holman Hunt, a Pre-Raphaelite himself, remembered well late in his life how previous to the appearance of the brethren the practice of painting was kept “in bounds from fear of incendiarism” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 227). Indeed, as matters developed, it can be said that Millais provided the wood and Dickens set the fire—and quite gladly on his part.

But this was a time, the very middle of the century, where old conventions proved less resilient than expected. The 1850s started with a huge polemic regarding what kind of art should be displayed for the entertainment of the masses and ended with a novel, Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), which took hold on people’s imagination. Dickens’ outburst maybe did make sense—if it made sense at all—at the very beginning of the decade. However, as time went by, articles like “Old Lamps for New Ones” merely reflected patronising attitudes of self-proclaimed arbiters of taste which barely fitted into a society that verged perilously on the democratisation of aesthetic appreciation. Slowly, as the mid-century advanced, the general public grew confident enough to trust their own judgement instead of blindly endorsing preconceived opinions. Pre-Raphaelitism was born of this necessity of finding a new pictorial language for a changing social body. It did not last long, but its brief span of life was enough to question the art orthodoxy imposed on painting by a forlorn elite of connoisseurs. The literary genre later developed by Wilkie Collins, that of sensation fiction, followed suit with its mingling of low and respectable literature. Mid-century England was indeed a time of change. Traditional criticism and the man in the street were at odds with each other. And, for many, it was time to catch on.

1.1 “A WRITER BY PROFESSION”

The first son of William Collins, a renowned landscape painter, and Harriet Geddes, a former governess, William Wilkie Collins was born in London in 1824. Although brought up in a deeply evangelical family, the well-supplied family library soon nourished the child’s fertile

imagination. This, and the two years passed in Italy with his parents and brother for the better improvement of his father's pictorial technique, left a lasting impression on Collins. His was an early interest in the craft of writing that did not meet with his father's approval, who, perhaps aware of the difficulties of a life devoted to art, got Collins a job in the tea business. His commercial pursuits did not last long though, and eventually Collins enrolled at Lincon's Inn to study law.⁹ With plenty of time to develop his literary skills, Collins wrote a novel, *Iolani; or Tahiti as it was* (1845), which was deemed unsuitable for publication.¹⁰ However, his next work was by far more successful. The *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq. RA: With Selections from his Journals and Correspondence* (1848), a biography of his recently deceased father, was published by Longman on a subscription basis: "What chances of success can be predicted for a book devoted to so peaceful a subject as the Art", Collins wrote, "amid the vital and varied interests of home politics and foreign revolutions now attracting everybody's attention in England, it is impossible to say" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 52). He was relieved enough when the first edition sold half of its copies and the cost of publication was covered—his sense of success only increased when positive reviews in the press followed. The *Memoirs* were a necessary boost to his confidence as a writer after the failure of his first literary effort. As luck would have it, his next endeavour, *Antonina; or the fall of Rome. A Romance of the Fifth Century* (1850) sold well. Published by Richard Bentley in three-volume format, *Antonina*, was, in Collins' own words, "an Historical Romance ... illustrative of the events of the first siege of Rome by Alaric, and of Gothic and Italian character in the fifth century" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 56).¹¹ Composition of the novel had started some time before, but the death of William Collins, and the writing of his biography, halted the work for a while. Once *Antonina* was completed, Collins addressed a letter to the publish-

⁹ "I had already begun to write in secret", Collins recollected, "and mercantile pursuits lost all attraction for me" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 206). Collins' first known publication was "Volpurno" (1843) in the pages of the New York magazine *Albion, or British, Colonial and Foreign Weekly Gazette*—no traces are left of its publication in the British press. This short tale was followed a month later by "The Last Stage Coachman" (1843), published in Douglas Jerrold's *Illuminated Magazine*.

¹⁰ Collins was inspired by William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* (1831). *Iolani*, rediscovered in 1991, was published in 1997 by Princeton University Press.

¹¹ *Antonina*, of little interest in what concerns the development of Collins' aesthetic thought, was heavily inspired by Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). The 1865 edition by Smith, Elder and Co., available at The British Library, opens with a remark by Scudéri's *Alarique*: "La ville cesse d'être: Le Romain est esclave, et le Goth est son maître."

er Richard Bentley offering the novel. He was confident enough in the success of the book because of “the modern taste for present times and the horrible, having been somewhat surfeited of late, a work appealing to other sympathies, would on that very account have, as novelty, a considerable chance” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 59). No doubt Collins knew how to negotiate to his best interest: to another correspondent he confessed his fears of the novel being rejected because of its lack of appeal to modern tastes.¹² But, to his credit, Collins needed to display as much confidence as possible when dealing with Bentley.

Known as the “king of the three-decker”—the kind of three-volume edition under which most of English fiction was published in the mid-century—Bentley was a force to be reckoned with.¹³ He owned, alongside other publishers, half of Mudie’s Select Library, whose control of the market of books during the mid-century was absolute. The other half belonged to Charles Edward Mudie, who opened the first organised circulating library in Bloomsbury “and for a subscription of a guinea a year sent out his box of novels to thousands of country homes” (Leavis 152). With thousands of subjects available to his customers through his famous catalogues, from poetry to history not forgetting travel or scientific works, Mudie turned the circulating library into a pivotal engine of the English market of books to such a degree that the mid-nineteenth century could be rightly considered the Age of Mudie. Therefore, publishing *Antonina* with Bentley secured Collins a respected editor at the very start of his professional career and an excellent introduction to the publishing world. Crucially, the novel was well received despite its faults. *Antonina*, an unsigned reviewer for the *Spectator* wrote, “is an able, a skilful, and a powerful romance”, the author having “a painter’s eye for description, much eloquence of a florid kind, clever ‘treatment’ and invention in the incidents, with some tenderness if not pathos” (qtd. in Page 40). It was a promising start in the field of fiction for a young writer: “Mr Collins has succeeded better in his romance of the fifth century than might have been expected from his previous training as a biographical writer, or the choice of a theme so remote from our own experience, and of an age of whose manners few

¹² See *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 62.

¹³ This form of publication, the three-volume format under which Collins’ *Memoirs* had been published, had been popularised by the great success of Walter Scott’s *Kenilworth: A Romance* (1821). Scott’s novel reached a record price of 31s. 6d., a guinea and a half, which became the standard price for any work of fiction published in three volumes for years to come. See Griest 41-42.

pictures have been preserved” (qtd. in Page 39). In an unsigned review for *The Athenaeum*, H. F. Chorley, who was to take a harsher tone on Collins’ sensational novels of the 1860s, thought of *Antonina* as “a richly-coloured impassioned story, busy with life, importunately strong in its appeals to our sympathy” (qtd. in Page 40). To his credit, Collins’ lack of training was compensated by a powerful dramatic instinct. But a note of caution followed: “Still, we must warn Mr Collins against the vices of the French School,—against the needless accumulation of revolting details,—against catering for a prurient taste by dwelling on such incidental portions of the subject as, being morbid, ought to be treated incidentally” (qtd. in Page 41).¹⁴ Collins, Chorley argued, should know better being the son of a distinguished royal academican: “Need we remind a painter’s son how much Terror and Power are enhanced by Beauty” (qtd. in Page 41). It was a remainder to which Collins seemingly paid little attention as his career advanced, thinking of that supposed enhancement as a gross distortion of the true purposes of Art. To him, both Terror and Power were integral parts of Nature exactly as Beauty was: focusing on the latter to the detriment of the former was preposterous. If morbid details were needed to tell a story, so it was. Indeed, Chorley’s criticism echoed many years later when the rage for sensation fiction was blamed on Collins and the nefarious influence of French novels. But for the moment the young writer had good reasons to feel confident about his future. *Antonina* was, for the unsigned reviewer of *Gentleman’s Magazine*, “one of the most remarkable publications of the present season” (qtd. in Page 44). Collins’ efforts had eventually paid off. With *Antonina*, “I became”, he later recollected, “what I am now, a writer by profession” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 207). And in that profession was to remain for the rest of his life.

By the time of Dickens’ ill-tempered review on Pre-Raphaelitism, Collins had an intimate knowledge of the movement. As it happened, his younger brother Charles had met both John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt when studying at the Royal Academy and soon the brethren became close acquaintances, to the extent of Millais painting a portrait of Collins at

¹⁴ The huge numbers of French novels published in England during the 1840s, with their plots of dubious morality, merely confirmed the long-held impression about the neighbouring country as the abode of debauchery. See Tillotson 7-9 for a brief, but valuable, account of the influence of French novels upon English fiction.

the very beginning of his literary career.¹⁵ Neither Collins nor his brother were strangers to the intellectual milieu of the capital: men like Coleridge or the painter David Wilkie—Collins’ godparent and from whom he took the name—had been regular guests at their parents’ abode. However, the brother’s association with the Pre-Raphaelites was tinged by an air of rebelliousness and artistic defiance quite at odds with their upbringing as sons of a royal academician painter.¹⁶ Collins, it is worth bearing in mind, started his career as a professional of the pen “among painters struggling to find an adequate expressive form for the experience of modernity” (Dolin 10). And theirs was a struggle that met with fierce opposition, with most of criticism that ensued after the publication of Dickens’ “Old Lamps for New Ones” (1850) aimed at destroying the reputation of the movement, to the point of a well-known art magazine of the time opening its July 1851 number with an article entitled “The Pre-Raffaellites [sic]” which explicitly associated the brethren with the work of antiquaries. This clique, wrote the anonymous author, should be termed “the Gothic school, or that school which might be engendered by the contemplation of monumental brasses or ancient stained glass windows, where the objects are flat, and inlaid, and coloured without any reference to harmony or chiaro-oscuro” (185).¹⁷ Nothing could be more removed from the neo-classical tradition promoted by the Royal Academy. The press certainly believed that the ultimate aim of the brethren was to copy mediaevalists, a fact that did not escape the attention of the young artists—and neither of Collins for that matter. According to Holman Hunt’s late recollections, early on Collins had expressed his desire

to write an article on our method of work, leaving the question of the value and faults entirely apart, that the public might understand our earnestness in the direct pursuit of nature, which, if not establishing the excellence of our productions, would at least be convincing proof that our untiring ambition was not to copy any mediaevalists, as it was so generally said we did. (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 220)

¹⁵ The portrait, dated 1850, now belongs to the National Portrait Gallery in London.

¹⁶ As Oscar Wilde wrote, the brethren were a bunch of “young poets and painters who banded together in London ... to revolutionise English poetry and painting” (qtd. in Andres 3).

¹⁷ *The Art Journal*’s article likens Pre-Raphaelite colour to that of “early pictures” and “illuminated missals” in which “no signs of either classification or subordination [appear]; on the contrary, blue, red, yellows, and green struggle for superiority” (“The Pre-Raffaellites” 186).

A clarification on the true purpose of the art movement was urgently needed against mounting criticism, a criticism that even reached Collins' brother, who was understood to be a brethren although in reality he never joined the brotherhood. The public should be taught about the main purpose of Pre-Raphaelitism, the direct pursuit of nature, in order to stop the trail of abuse. However, contrary to Holman Hunt's suggestion of the piece remaining wishful thinking, Collins did indeed write an explanatory article on the movement. Only that one must look carefully to find it.

1.2 THE NOVEL STYLE OF PAINTING

At the very beginning of 1851, Collins' *Rambles Beyond Railways*, the story of a holiday walk through Cornwall, was published by Bentley. A moderate success, this travel book, alongside the *Memoirs* and *Antonina*, formed Collins' meagre literary production up to that point in time. One therefore wonders why Bentley, one of the most important editors of the time, asked the young writer to review the Summer Exhibition of that year.¹⁸ The annual showcase at Trafalgar Square was widely reported in newspapers and weeklies alike with detailed accounts of the pictures on exhibition. Even under the policy of anonymity under which *Bentley's Miscellany* operated—a policy common to most magazines of the time—to write about the exhibition was a task not to be treated lightly. Maybe Bentley trusted his young protégé aware, as he was, of his artistic upbringing, or maybe Collins' intimate connection with the brotherhood did not go unnoticed. Be that as it may, "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" (1851) was duly published unsigned in *Bentley's Miscellany*. The annual showcase at Trafalgar Square contained, in Collins' words, "an unusually large number of pictures, of which as a nation we may fairly feel proud; and from which our foreign visitors may well learn to appreciate the excellence, the originality, and the cheering onward progress of English Art" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 617). Inevitably, the Pre-Raphaelite paint-

¹⁸ In the early Victorian era it was common practice among the editors of periodicals to trust the art reviews either to artists or novelists. Thackeray, for instance, reviewed the Royal Academy exhibitions for *Fraser's Magazine* in the late 1830s and 1840s under the pseudonym "Michael Angelo Titmarsh". See Prettejohn 74 for more information.

ings on display did not escape Collins' attention. The new style of painting was characterised by "an almost painful minuteness of finish and detail; a disregard of the ordinary rules of composition and colour; and an evident intention of not appealing to any popular predilections on the subject of grace or beauty" (Collins, "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 623).¹⁹ It was precisely that very peculiar intention which had prompted Dickens' bleak review of Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Collins, it is important to bear in mind, was addressing the question of the "novel and strongly-marked style" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 622) in a time when to mount a defence of the brotherhood, no matter how carefully worded it was, meant to defy the wisdom of the most important living writer in England. But family issues intervened: the younger of William Collins' sons happened to exhibit a painting on the walls of the Royal Academy in the summer of 1851. Charles Collins' *Convent Thoughts* was indeed quite a sight to behold. And therefore ripe for the harshest criticism.

Convent Thoughts depicts a female novice in a garden lost in her own thoughts whilst she contemplates a passion flower held on her left hand. On describing the painting, Collins praised the rendering of the flowers and water plants for displaying a "most astonishing minuteness and fidelity to Nature—we have all the fibres in a leaf, all the faintest varieties of bloom in a flower, followed through every gradation" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 622). As an example of painful minuteness of finish and detail, Charles Collins' painting was unmatched, a triumph of subtlety where the sentiment conveyed was hinted rather than exposed. A "deep poetic feeling" pervaded the whole composition, as Collins put it, best embodied by a novice "pure, thoughtful and subdued, almost to severity" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 623). Maybe such a painting did not appeal to popular ideas of beauty, but its technical virtuosity was beyond dispute. *Convent Thoughts* should be praised in accordance: "Briefly", Collins wrote, "this picture is one which appeals, in its purpose and conception, only to the more refined order of minds—the general spectator will probably discover little more in it, than dexterity of manipulation" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 623-624). Collins' laudatory analysis is all the more remarkable when bearing in mind the bad

¹⁹ William Michael Rossetti, in his biography of his brother, pointed out the use of bright instead of crude colours by the brethren since "primary hues, so much affected by painters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, [were] a very marked trait in the practice of the Praeraphaelite [*sic*] Brotherhood at its inception" (143).

press received by the painting. *Convent Thoughts* was, according to *The Times*, an artistic affront neither to be praised nor tolerated. The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, the newspaper argued, meant a depiction of nature that necessarily conveyed “a thousand artistic hypocrisies”.²⁰ There was no beauty of the human form to be found upon a Pre-Raphaelite canvas, no high ideal to be pursued by the artist. For the practitioners of this new style of painting, as *The Times*’ argument followed, beauty was not divine, but all too human. The Pre-Raphaelites’ technical tricks, as Collins cunningly hinted, proved of no avail amongst those comfortable enough with orthodox painting conceptions. Clearly, Dickens’ criticism proved an enduring one.

Collins’ appeal to the more refined order of minds extended, with limitations, to the pictures on exhibition by Millais and Holman Hunt. Millais’ *The Return of the Dove to the Ark* (1851), quite a remarkable instance of Pre-Raphaelitism in its own way, lacked nonetheless according to Collins the compelling confidence of *Convent Thoughts*. Because Millais aimed less high than the young Collins, his painting “will therefore be more readily understood” (Collins, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624). However, an exquisite attention to detail pervaded *The Return of the Dove to the Ark*. This was a painting where Millais’ attentive eye rendered the minutest details with an incredible degree of accuracy that impressed Collins: “every stalk of the straw on which the figures are standing, is separately painted; the draperies are studied and arranged, with great skill and power; and the flesh-tints are forcible in an extraordinary degree” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624). Millais’ craftsmanship was equally evident in *The Woodman’s Daughter* (1851), with its extraordinary detailed landscape, a technical virtuosity that also applied to Holman Hunt’s *Valentine Receiving Sylvia from Proteus* (1851). Holman Hunt’s painting was especially praised by Collins for its exquisite, minute rendering of the smallest details present in nature. Dry leaves, for instance, were treated “with an elaboration beyond which art cannot go ... every inequality of the wooded background is represented with admirable fidelity to nature” and even the brightness of the sunlight “never reminds us of the trickeries of the palette—

²⁰ According to *The Times*’ reviewer, Charles Collins’ painting summarised “a thousand artistic hypocrisies which insist on the true rendering of a buckle or a belt, while they allow the beauties of the human form divine to be lost sight of” (609).

which is the evident result of the most intelligent and the most unflinching study” (Collins, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624). Both Holman Hunt and Millais submitted paintings worthy of being labelled as Pre-Raphaelite, perfect examples of that dexterity of technique immediately spotted as the foremost characteristic of this new style. Overall, the paintings of the three young artists on exhibition at Trafalgar Square were full of promise. As Collins wrote, they showed “the material of painters of first rate ability: we admire sincerely their earnestness of purpose, their originality of thought, their close and reverent study of nature” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624-625). His was certainly a positive assessment all the more remarkable bearing in mind Dickens’ lambasting attack on the brotherhood. However, no matter how fond he was of the new style of painting, Collins was also eager to point out some minor faults.

An extreme attention to detail, Collins argued, even when highly valuable, could also spoil the necessary harmony of the composition. It seemed to Collins that the Pre-Raphaelites were “wanting in one great desideratum of all art—judgement in selection” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624). Not even his own brother, praised as he was a few lines above, could avoid Collins’ criticism: “For instance, all the lines and shapes in Mr Collins covent garden [*sic*] are as straight and formal as possible; but why he should have selected such a garden for representation? Would he have painted less truly and carefully, if he had painted a garden in which some of the accidental sinuosities of nature were left untouched by the gardener’s spade and shears?” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624). The Pre-Raphaelite extreme attachment to nature, as Collins saw it, paradoxically conveyed an idealisation of sorts of the natural world that contradicted the main tenets of the movement. It was obvious that never for a moment the brethren thought of deformities as pertaining to the natural realm. Indeed, the Pre-Raphaelite F. G. Stephens had been quite explicit in his essay on Italian painting for the Brotherhood’s short-lived journal *The Germ* (1850): “We shall find a great pleasure in proportion to our closer communion with nature, and by a more exact adherence to all her details, (for nature has no peculiarities or excentricities) [*sic*] in whatsoever direction her study may conduct” (qtd. in Hosmon 59). But Collins thought that nature did indeed have peculiarities and eccentricities impossible to ignore no matter what the Pre-Raphaelite credo said.

Beauty went side by side with ugliness in the natural world. In fact, as his career as professional of the pen progressed, Collins' interest in the "accidental sinuosities of nature" only deepened, manipulating gender conventions in his fiction to extremes rarely seen in nineteenth century literature—many times almost bordering on grotesqueries. Even well before exploiting the sensational plots that made him famous, Collins understood the peculiarities of the natural realm as an integral part of it. Nature was indeed plagued by eccentricities and the brethren, consciously ignoring this blatant truth, were imperilling their recognition as great artists. Millais' *Woodman Daughter* (1850) was another case in point. Was it necessary, wondered Collins, to depict a little workhouse-drudge in the way Millais did on his canvas? A healthy child with the characteristic bloom and freshness of childhood could well have been painted without spoiling the picture: "Would his colour have been less forcible, his drawing less true, if he had conceded thus much to public taste?" (Collins, "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 625). The brethren seemed intent on recoiling in earnest from the general spectator, appealing to "more refined minds" rather than those of the common public—which meant, when bearing in mind the open access granted to the summer exhibitions, an audience literate enough to grasp the intricacies of painting. Approaches like the one argued by F. G. Stephens led nowhere, Collins seemed to imply. In his travel book *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1850), when writing about the earliest productions of the Italian School of painting, Collins noticed how a canvas could be spoiled by a rigid technique: "We first perceive the false perspective of a scene or the quaint rigidity of a figure", he wrote, "[and] only afterwards discover that these crudities and formalities roughly enshrine the germs of deep poetic feeling, and the first struggling perceptions of grace, beauty, and truth" (262-263). The brethren were committing the very same mistakes of the pictorial language that they were trying to avoid, masquerading any poetic feeling under an excessive idealisation of nature instead of beauty. Healthy children, Collins denounced, existed alongside workhouse-drudges. A true artist, he seemed to argue, should play with the best and worst that Nature offered, not being limited by

misconceptions.²¹ Extreme attachments to aesthetic ideals could lead inevitably to falsities. Therefore, I do not necessarily agree with Andrew Lycett when he writes how Collins “like Dickens, ... tended to ignore the PRB’s claim to be realists and to look on them as a retrogressive force” (91-92). They were indeed realists for Collins, although in a way that he found misleading. From his point of view, the brethren, notwithstanding their achievements, were still “emerging from the darkness to the true light” standing as they were in a “critical turning point of their career; and that, 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” (Collins, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624-625). The Pre-Raphaelite’s excessive attention to nature *as they deemed it to be* precluded the required harmony or singleness of effect thought by Collins necessary for any great work of art. That, and an apparent lack of awareness of the demands imposed by public taste, marred the development of the brethren. As artists, the Pre-Raphaelites truly exhibited a dexterity of first-class painters that deserved to be praised. However, when approaching their work, “they must be admired bit by bit, as we have reviewed them”, Collins wrote, “or not admired at all” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 625)—which was precisely what most contemporary reviewers choose to do.

Collins’ review of the Summer Exhibition of 1851 is, as far as I know, one of the few articles fairly sympathetic to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Prior to Dickens’ “Old Lamps for New Ones”, most of criticism directed against the brethren had been mild in tone. The exhibition of

²¹ “Why should all the forms be so odd, quaint and repulsive?”, the critic of the *Eclectic Review* wrote apropos Holman Hunt’s *Claudio and Isabella* (1850-1853). “Was it needful that Isabella should be commonplace on countenance, and uncouth in general appearance? ... was it imperatively necessary ... that Claudio should be high shouldered, wooden in frame and his countenance revoltingly ugly?” (qtd. in Andres 24). It was a criticism shared by *The Athenaeum* when the painting was exhibited in 1853. To the reviewer, Claudio was “a vulgar lout” and Isabella “never could have inspired” any passion on him. “If Mr. Hunt will not give us beauty, at least let him refrain from idealising vulgarity” (qtd. in Andres, 24). Collins, I suspect, would have agreed.

Millais' *Isabella* and Holman Hunt's *Rienzi* back in 1849 went without complaints.²² No accusations were levelled against the brethren then, no vicious attacks on their craftsmanship went public. At its early stages, Pre-Raphaelitism attracted no irate criticism. But the brotherhood's fate changed dramatically when Dickens turned his attention to Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850). As Michael Rossetti, one of the founding members, recollected years later, "[t]he young men were discovered to be working on a common principle, in antagonism more or less decided to established rules and current reputations; and the floodgates or virulence were let loose, not because the pictures were bad ... but because they authors were regarded and detested as pestilent heretics" (146).²³ It was an heresy, Rossetti's forgot to mention, only noticeable after Dickens' fanatical defence of art orthodoxy in his widely circulated magazine. Little hope was left for the brethren once they were signalled by the most famous writer of the time. *Blackwood's Magazine*, for instance, wrote of Millais' depiction of the Holy Family as an "unpleasingly and atrociously affected picture" (qtd. in Millais 75). And *The Times* ferocious criticism prompted Millais to complain that the journal "has sold itself to destroy us" (qtd. in Millais 101). But when trying to do so, the newspaper radically changed the fortunes of the brethren. The harsh backlash against the Brotherhood prompted John Ruskin to intervene, hardly an innocent move bearing in mind his tremendous popularity as art critic. Ruskin sent two letters to *The Times* that mounted to a positive assessment of the young artists under siege. Acknowledging in the very first place his lack of personal acquaintance with the brethren, Ruskin denied the widely spread accusation of Pre-Raphaelitism being

²² Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, exhibited at the Free Exhibition of Hyde Park in 1849, had been positively reviewed by *The Athenaeum* for being "a manifestation of true mental power ... in which Art is made the exponent of some high aim" (Rossetti 147). Although a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti's evolution as a painter soon set him apart from Millais and Holman Hunt, the true core of the movement. Suffice to say that at an early stage Rossetti thought of himself as a Pre-Raphaelite.

²³ According to Michael Rossetti, his brother Dante explained the significance of the initials "P.R.B", with which the brethren signed their pictures, to the sculptor Alexander Munro. Munro told Angus Reach, a light writer for the *Illustrated London News*, who wrote about it in the journal. Most probably, I think, the article caught Dickens' attention.

a mere reproduction of old-fashioned techniques without artistic value.²⁴ Far from it, Ruskin adamantly defended the intrinsic contemporary nature of the movement:

They [the Pre-Raphaelites] intend to return to early days in this one point only—that, as far as in them lies, they will draw either what they see, or what they suppose might have been the actual facts of the scene they desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture making; and they have chosen their unfortunate though not inaccurate name because all artists did this before Raphael’s time, and after Raphael’s time did *not* do this, but sought to paint fair pictures rather than represent stern facts, of which the consequence has been that from Raphael’s time to this day historical art has been in acknowledged decadence. (“Letters to the Editor” 8)

As an assessment of the movement, Ruskin’s spirited defence still rings true.²⁵ Both Millais and Holman Hunt, he argued, as well as the rest of artists labelled under the banner of Pre-Raphaelitism, heroically rejected the tyranny established by Raphael’s practice upon which Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, had grounded the core curricula to be taught at the institution.²⁶ Reynolds thought of the trained eye of the artist as a tool to notice the defects of nature in search of the Ideal Beauty which great art should aim for: “Alexander”, he wrote, “is said to have been of a low stature: a Painter ought not so to repre-

²⁴ The press of the mid-century pointed out the connection of the Brotherhood with a group of German artists known as the German Pre-Raphaelites or Nazarenes established in Rome since the first decades of the century. Ford Madox Brown was familiar with their work and in 1848 became Rossetti’s teacher. However, Ruskin was adamant in his denial of any kind of relation between the two groups of artists: “A falsehood of this kind could not have obtained credence anywhere but in England, few English people, comparatively, having even seen a picture of early Italian Masters ... there is not a shadow of resemblance between the two styles” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 27).

²⁵ Ruskin’s letter echoes his encouragement in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) to the artists to be “humble and earnest in following the steps of nature, and tracing the finger of God ... [They should] go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remembering her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing ... and rejoicing always in the truth” (qtd. in Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* 62). Clearly the brethren put into practice Ruskin’s ideas before meeting him. In fact, Holman Hunt was deeply impressed by *Modern Painters*.

²⁶ Holman Hunt, in his late recollections of the early days of the Brotherhood, remembered showing to Millais his *Rienzi* “in the painting of which at the outset I was putting in practice the principle of rejection of conventional dogma, and pursuing that of direct application to Nature for each feature, however humble a part of foreground or background might be” (“Pre-Raphaelitism” 33). Holman Hunt perfectly knew the implications of such practice: “I justified the doing of this”, he wrote, “thoroughly as the only sure means of eradicating the stereotyped tricks of decadent schools, and of any conventions not recommended by experienced personal judgment” (“Pre-Raphaelitism” 33).

sent him. Agesilaus was low, lame and of a mean appearance: none of these defects ought to appear in a piece of which he is the hero ... All this is not falsifying any fact; it is taking an allowed poetical license” (qtd. in Burnet 57). In truth, it was a radical endorsement of the falsification of reality that exerted a crucial influence in the development of the English School of painting for decades to come. Drawing his theories heavily on the practice of the Old Masters, especially those most suitable to his tastes as Raphael, Reynolds banned from the canvas any depiction that did not conform to his very peculiar understanding of painting. As the argument followed, only the most beautiful forms should be represented by the skilful hand of the artist since defects in nature undermined the very purpose of art. Reynolds carried out to the extreme the eighteenth-century understanding of Nature as “the raw, very raw, material out of which the artist had to make something acceptable” (Steegman, *The Rule of Taste* 13). Consequently, any distortion of reality was justified to achieve the desired end. Reynolds’ “poetical license” became the core of art orthodoxy in painting until the Pre-Raphaelites turned to nature as their guide. Millais’ depiction of the Holy Family in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) as *he supposed might have been* meant a brutal rebuttal of Reynolds’ aesthetic theories that roused the anger of the guardians of art orthodoxy—with Dickens leading the pack. The harsh criticism that ensued bore testimony to the pervasive influence of the first president of the Royal Academy. However, as Ruskin explained in his letters to *The Times*, grounding the art of painting in nature, the real thing, as the brethren were doing, was a bold and necessary step for its improvement. If that meant the obliteration of Reynolds’ teachings, so be it. For Ruskin, “a feeling compounded of indolence, infidelity, sensuality and shallow pride” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 27) pervaded the practice of painting in England as result of Reynolds’ dogma.²⁷ The Pre-Raphaelites, he argued, deserved to be taken seriously for two reasons. Firstly, they were consummate artists judging by their technique—notwithstanding minor faults. Secondly, their extreme attention to detail was a most remarkable one. Gone

²⁷ Ruskin even ventured to suggest the new style of painting as the realisation of his thoughts on art: “Eight years ago, in the close of the first volume of ‘Modern Painters’”, he wrote, “I ventured to give the following advice to the young artists of England: ‘They should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selected nothing, and scorning nothing’” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 3). Traditional criticism has seen in Ruskin’s idea of Nature as a source for great Art the core of the Brotherhood’s aesthetic ideas. New interpretations, nonetheless, have turned upside down this argument and pointed out the influence of the brethren in the development of Ruskin’s thought. See Marcia Werner 50-51.

were the use of the triangular composition, the chiaroscuro and open brushwork in painting, all of them elemental rules of composition taken from Sir Joshua Reynolds which the brethren thought as mere “slosh”—prompting Reynolds’ nickname, “Sir Sloshua”.²⁸ A new school of art could be in the making with a bit of improvement, Ruskin thought, exactly the same conclusion reached by Collins in “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” (1851). Ruskin had no doubts: it was time for the practice of painting in England to move forward even if that meant paradoxically going back to the kind of art practised *avant* Raphael. Stern facts, and not fair pictures, were urgently needed. And that was exactly what the Pre-Raphaelites were providing for.

Both Collins and Ruskin were far more sympathetic to Pre-Raphaelitism than most contemporary critics. However, if, following George P. Landow, “apparently, to weaken the Royal Academy was to weaken the power of conservatism, and to weaken the power of conservatism was to bring on the revolution” (129), then one wonders why the very same institution that the brethren were trying to destroy allowed the hanging of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on the walls of the Trafalgar Square building. Millais, Holman Hunt, and even Charles Collins, it is worth bearing in mind, were students at the institution, not a bunch of bohemians united in a bid against it.²⁹ Those in the know of the internal mechanisms of the academy—like Collins for that matter—were perfectly aware that every student was “superintended directly by the Royal Academicians, who advise, assist and encourage him, until he is fit for the last ordeal of his student-life—the composition of an original historical picture, from a subject selected by the Institution to which he is attached” (Collins, *Life of William Collins* 32). Little

²⁸ “Slosh”, following William Michael Rossetti, was a term used in the early days of the Brotherhood to mean “a hasty, washy, indeterminate manner in painting, neglectful of severe form and accurate detail, and lavish of untutored style” (157). A poem published as dirge for *The Germ*, the short-lived journal of the Pre-Raphaelites, gives a good measure of the brethren’s stand in regard to Reynolds: “A time *Sordello* shall be read,/And arguments be clean abolished,/And sculpture punched upon the head,/And mathematics quite demolished;/And *Art and Poetry* instead/Come out without a word of prose in,/And all who paint as Sloshua did/Have all their sloshy fingers frozen” (qtd. in Rossetti 157).

²⁹ According to Sophia Andres, the brethren “were seen as a subversive, conspiratorial group, perhaps yet involved in another political upheaval, and were assailed by contemporary critics” (5). They were certainly seen as subversive by the orthodox art criticism of the day but the very fact of being allowed to exhibit their paintings during the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy, clearly with the acquiescence of the academicians, questioned this ostracism. Andres does not provide sources to sustain the claim of political upheaval. Not even Dickens in his strident review did ever suggest this connection.

chance had the brethren of being granted permission to exhibit their pictures without having passed the usual checks by the academicians in charge. Indeed, a mere spirit of toleration does not suffice to explain the exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings after the unwanted attention prompted by Dickens' "Old Lamps for New Ones". Neither Millais nor Holman Hunt were barred from the Summer Exhibition after the annual showcase of 1850. If the brethren were able to exhibit their pictures at all, I think, was precisely due to the courage and perseverance of the Hanging Committee. Admission for the annual exhibition was dependent first and foremost on the decision of the academicians: no external elements as far as I know were involved in the procedure.³⁰ It was a plain fact that did not escape Dickens' attention when he blamed the "great educational establishment" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 266) at Trafalgar Square for the display of Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Had the members of the Hanging Committee been truthful to the principles of the institution, Dickens argued, no Pre-Raphaelite painting would ever have been exhibited. And he was thoroughly right. But Dickens' argument also reflected an astonishing ignorance of his environment, an ignorance all the more remarkable coming from a man whose way of living was precisely the rendering upon a sheet of paper of the facts of daily life. What Dickens termed as the "great educational establishment" was merely reflecting the deep changes affecting the social body of the country when allowing the exhibition of Millais' work. As John Steegman wrote in his classic book *Consort of Taste* (1950), "[t]he courage of the Hanging Committees of 1849 and 1850, which accepted the earliest Pre-Raphaelite pictures, is not always given its due" (168). Dickens' take on Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* suggests a huge disconnection between the kind of art education thought suitable by the guardians of art orthodoxy and the changing aesthetic demands of an amorphous social body being transformed by the spread of capitalist development. Change was the driving force of the times in mid-century England, and Pre-Raphaelitism, no matter how much enraged Dickens felt, another outcome of it.

³⁰ Collins addressed again this issue in "A Passage in the Life of Mr Perugino Potts" (1852) also for *Bentley's Miscellany*. "A Passage" revolves around the misadventures of Mr Perugino in Italy where he goes in search of a success that he is unable to find in England—"for seven years has modest genius knocked for admission at the door of the Royal Academy, and invariably the answer of the Royal Academicians has been, 'not at home'" ("A Passage in the Life of Mr Perugino Potts" 153).

“The so-called middle-class of England”, F. G. Stephens wrote in 1871, “has been that which has done the most for English art. While its social superiors ‘*praised*’ Pietro Perugino, neglected Turner, let Wilson starve, and gave as much for Gaspar Poussin as for Raphael; the merchant princes bought off Turner, William Holman Hunt, and Rossetti” (qtd. in Landow 126). Looking back from the vantage point of the 1870s, Stephens rightly understood the crucial role played by the so-called merchant princes in the development of a new aesthetic suitable to their own interests and at odds with the kind of painting favoured by their “social superiors”. Indeed, these men were, as far as I understand, alongside the Council of the Academy, the main reason for the success of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), for instance, was commissioned by the industrial baronet Thomas Fairbairn. And the Marchioness Dowager of Bath purchased Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49) after being displayed in the Free Exhibition at Hyde Park. The Pre-Raphaelite style of painting struck a chord amongst those with income enough to spend at their disposal and desirous of an aesthetic independent from the whims and fancies of art connoisseurs. The merchant princes mentioned by Stephens understood the acquisition of works of art as a means to social validation: unable to reclaim as their own great masters as Raphael, they naturally turned their attention to those developing a new pictorial practice that they could appropriate. Young painters like Millais or Holman Hunt were lucky enough to be supported by a new class of *nouveaux riches* aiming for a representative aesthetic of their own. This patronage exerted by a new class of collectors, alongside the admissions policy of the Hanging Committee in charge of the annual exhibitions at the Royal Academy, merely mirrored the changing taste of a society that no longer felt obliged to second the opinions of those in possession of the rule of taste. Therefore, is not entirely true that, as Oscar Wilde wrote, critics of Pre-Raphaelitism “blinded the public, but simply confirmed the artists in their convictions” (qtd. in Andres 3-4). They did so to a certain extent. Dickens and the conservative press certainly thundered as loud as they could against the brethren, but theirs was a criticism that did not reach the ears, less the purses, of the rising merchant princes who were, with their purchasers, validating an art previously thought *hors norme*. Nor that their actions were surprising. Writing in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams pointed out how “[a] new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively

subordinate, this is always likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete” (124). A certain degree of opposition to dominant elements is always allowed by the very particular class structure of any given society. In this sense, to the new aesthetic patronised by the rising merchant princes best suited the “(often uneven) emergence of elements of a new cultural formation” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 124). Both the industrial baronet Thomas Fairbairn and the Marchioness Dowager of Bath proved stubborn enough to decide for themselves what kind of art best accommodated to their tastes. And when doing so they asserted their independence of thought: “To disagree with three-fourths of all England on all points”, Wilde wrote, “is one of the first elements of sanity” (qtd. in Andres 3-4). Arguably, the success of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was built on that disagreement.

Reading Collins’ “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” (1851) for *Bentleys’ Miscellany*, one wonders in what measure the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic affected the development of his fiction. Current academic criticism, as far as I know, seems little concerned about this question although Catherine Peters has suggested a confrontational attitude in the writer towards the new style of painting. According to Peters, Collins strongly rejected the Pre-Raphaelite break with the pictorial tradition embodied by his father. Because he had been educated in a school of thought thoroughly alien to the brethren’s practice, their attitude “baffled him, and he disliked it, in secret, as much as Dickens did” (Peters 103-104). But there is no letter or scrap of writing existent to my knowledge to sustain Peter’s affirmation of Collins’ secret dislike of Pre-Raphaelitism. Collins, in his unsigned article for *Bentleys’ Miscellany*, gave a positive assessment of the movement although certainly not devoid of criticism. He praised the brethren’s commitment to a truthful depiction of nature but at the same time found alarming an excessive attention to detail that could derail their efforts. It is difficult to understand how Collins could have been baffled by Pre-Raphaelitism when he took an active part in promoting the careers of his friends. He explicitly requested Richard Bentley, his editor at the time, to commission a few illustrations for his upcoming short Christmas story “The Mask of Shakespeare” (1851). Who was to be asked Collins knew perfectly well:

My idea is that a Frontispiece Vignette and Tail Piece would be quite enough—*well* done—ordinary mediocre work won’t do—work by the famous men only to be had at a

high price; and, as far as my knowledge of the great names goes, not even then to be had in time. I should propose that the three illustrations should be done by three young gentlemen who have lately been making an immense stir in the world of Art, and earned the distinction of being attacked by *The Times* (any notice *there* is a distinction)—and defended in a special pamphlet by Ruskin—he redoubtable *Pre-Raphael-Brotherhood*!! (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 73)

To be publicly attacked by the most important English newspaper as *The Times* was meant for Collins a merit not to be ashamed of. He, to my mind, relished the image of his brother and friends as the *enfants terribles* of English painting. His letter to Bentley, dated 23 October 1851, shows the extent of Collins' interest in the well-being of the brethren:

One of these 'Brothers' happens to be *my* brother as well—the other two Millais and Hunt are intimate friends. For *my* sake as well as their own they would work their best—and do something striking, no matter on how small a scale—I could be constantly at their elbows, and get them to be [erased word] ready as soon as I should. Should you be willing to try them?—and give them *some* re[mun]eration—the amount of which I could easily settle between you and them. (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 73)³¹

Eventually some sort of collaboration did indeed happen and Collins' short story was published with a frontispiece by Millais—his very first published drawing though not their last collaboration.³² Collins' support was all the more welcomed bearing in mind the very particular situation of the art market in mid-century England. Contrary to France and its state patronage of the arts through prizes, competitions and different forms of recognition, the English artist faced a barren landscape. A favourable public reputation was required in order to attract the attention of patrons eager to buy the latest art commodity. In this sense, Collins' "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" can be seen as an attempt to improve the reputation of the

³¹ Notwithstanding Collins' insistence, his brother was never considered a member of the Brotherhood by the inner circle.

³² Millais drew another frontispiece for Collins' *No Name* (1862) and was commissioned by him to draw a portrait of his brother Charles in his death bed. Collins wished Millais to illustrate the monthly serialisation of *Armadale* (1864-1866) in the *Cornhill* magazine. However, it was George Housman Thomas who eventually did the illustrations.

brethren in the marketplace of art. To accuse the young writer of having a hostile attitude towards his friends is simply a misconception prompted by a distorted or little careful reading of his article. Collins was far from being baffled by Pre-Raphaelitism. With reservations, he praised the “novel and strongly-marked style” (“The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 622) of his friends. He had good reasons to do so. His next novel owed a good deal to the Pre-Raphaelite’s commitment to a truthful rendition of nature.

2 *BASIL: A STORY OF MODERN LIFE* (1852)

The story of the infatuation of a young gentleman with a linen draper's daughter, Collins' *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852) marked a significant point of departure from the historical setting of *Antonina* (1849). Published as a three-volume novel by Richard Bentley, contemporary events were central to the plot as the subtitle of the novel indicates.³³ The youngest son of an English landowner, Basil falls in love with a young girl when travelling back home by omnibus. He follows the girl to her abode in the newly-built suburbs north of Regent's Park and, after contriving a meeting with her father, asks him permission to marry her. Mr Sherwin, a linen draper, consents but with conditions: the marriage must take place within a week and to remain not consummated for one year since his daughter Margaret is just seventeen. It also needs to be kept under secrecy. The delay is intended to give Basil enough time to persuade his father about the convenience of the marriage. Eventually, the wedding takes place and Basil spends the next few months duly visiting Margaret under the strict observance of his father-in-law. As time goes by, Basil's attempts to improve Margaret's mind prove useless. The arrival of Robert Mannion, Mr Sherwin's clerk, from a business trip to France changes the dynamics of the relationship. Basil soon notices a different attitude in both Margaret and Mannion. On the evening of his marriage's anniversary, the very same night when it is supposed to be consummated, Margaret intends to go to a party and then be escorted back by Mannion. Basil decides to follow them when leaving the house. They go to a hotel where Basil, through a thin partition wall, realises the sexual nature of their relationship. Unable to control himself, he intrudes into the room and attacks Mannion. In the ensuing fight the latter is disfigured and loses sight of an eye. Only later Basil realises that Margaret is as guilty as Mannion, despite Mr Sherwin's exculpatory letters. Basil's father, once is told of his son's secret marriage, immediately repudiates him, enraged by the debasement of the family's name

³³ The novel was published at a lower price than usual by Bentley—10s.6d. in three-decker form, rather than the normal 31s. 6d.—in an effort to bypass the circulating library system. Collins, in a letter to Bentley, expressed his delight “to hear that your house is about to lead the way in lowering the present extravagantly absurd prices charged for works of fiction” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 87). Despite his relative inexperience in the field of letters, Collins showed quite a remarkable acumen of how the business of literature worked: “I should be inclined to doubt the propriety of this adhering to the three volume form”, he wrote to Bentley, “if I did not believe that you know the ‘Manner and Customs’ of Librarians much better than I do and are able to calculate much better than I can on the increase of sale among the Libraries generally, which is likely to be produced by the decrease in prices” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 87). Bentley, as Collins acknowledged, took a gamble of uncertain result.

brought by such an ill-thought union. Indeed, as Basil soon learns, events of the past also played their part: Mannion's father, a gentleman living beyond his means, was hanged for forgery after his patron refused to intervene. The patron was none other than Basil's *père*. A miserable life ensued for Mannion who was forced to take menial jobs under assumed names until he met Mr Sherwin. In the close acquaintance that developed, Mannion came to regard Margaret as his property, her marriage to Basil being felt as the ultimate offence. Mannion devoted himself to ruin Basil's family reputation. Trying to avoid a scandal, Basil's elder brother, Ralph, who has just returned from the continent, pays a visit to Mr Sherwin to buy his silence. By chance he gets a letter from Mannion confirming Margaret's guilt. Eventually she contracts typhus and dies, not before being forgiven by Basil in her deathbed. Basil leaves for Cornwall hoping to live a secluded life in a fishing village. However, Mannion follows him and the two men fight in the cliff tops. It does not last long though: Mannion falls to his death and the shock causes Basil to collapse. Brought back to London and eventually reconciled with his father, Basil retires to live in the countryside after having written the past events of his life.

Originally subtitled *A Story of Modern Life*, and then renamed simply as *Basil* for the revised one-volume edition of 1862, Collins' new literary commodity was the result of his new-found interest in contemporary events.³⁴ The "Letter of Dedication to James Ward, Esq." that opens the novel is a detailed statement of Collins' thoughts upon the craft of writing that helps to understand his development as a writer: "My idea", he wrote, "was that the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the ideal which was sure to spring out of it" (*Basil* 3).³⁵ Indeed, Collins' concern for an accurate rendition of modern life guided the writing of the novel: "Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards heaven by taking root in earth", he wrote. "Is not the

³⁴ *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* was reprinted in 1856 in one volume by James Blackwood without alterations. However, Collins revised extensively the novel for its publication in one volume in 1862 by Sampson Low, Son & Co. Dropping the subtitle and deleting long passages as well as including two scenes (crucially the chance meeting between Basil and Margaret in an omnibus), Collins tightened the narrative pace of the novel. The Oxford World's Classics edition of 2008 used in this dissertation is based on the 1862 revised version of the novel. For reasons of convenience I will use the short title of the 1862 edition.

³⁵ James Ward, a close friend of Collins, was named executor of his will in 1882.

noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth?" (*Basil* 3). It might well be. But such a rhetorical question, being asked at a time when Pre-Raphaelitism still aroused strong emotions amongst the guardians of art orthodoxy, was far from innocent. Collins' close friend Millais had been guided by that very same concern when depicting the Holy Family in *Christ in the House of His Parents*. His effort, to put it mildly, had not been greatly appreciated. The rage against Millais most probably prompted Collins to write his "Letter of Dedication" as a means of explanation: he perfectly knew that his Pre-Raphaelite friends, acting under the very same conviction of adhering to "the noblest poetry of every-day truth", made of themselves the subject of the vilest scorn in the press. Struggling to render upon a canvas a new pictorial language, the brethren paid a heavy price for their aesthetic stand. With good reason there is no explicit mention of Pre-Raphaelitism in the "Letter of Dedication" that opens *Basil*, the novel being published in the aftermath of Dickens' merciless attack on Millais and the Pre-Raphaelite school. Any explicit endorsement of his friends' aesthetic, no matter how tempered, if ever crossed Collins' mind, would most probably have jeopardised his literary career.³⁶ To publicly disavow Dickens, whose prestige was unmatched at the time, meant literary suicide for any young writer trying to make a living in the competitive literary market of mid-century fiction. I fully agree with Tim Dolin's assertion of Collins employing in his "Letter of Dedication" a language "that might almost have been used to debate Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art*" (Dolin 8). By the same token, it could be said that the preface of sorts written by Collins for *Basil* questioned Dickens' aesthetic stand against Pre-Raphaelitism. At least to a certain extent. Collins' declaration of intentions echoed a tenet of the new style of painting, that of "the poetry of every-day truth", all the more valuable in a time when appreciation towards the brethren still ran low. But what Collins meant by depiction of truth as presented in Nature do not necessarily entailed a thorough adhesion to the Pre-Raphaelite credo. His already mentioned review of the 1851 Summer Exhibition for *Bentleys' Miscellany* had made quite clear how much he was willing to concede on this point.

³⁶ Tim Dolin's analysis, I think, shows a remarkable lack of accuracy: "The Letter was, rather, an opportunity to declare his seriousness of purpose by associating himself not with advances in the novel ... but with the most advanced thinking in London art circles", he writes. "Collins' model was not only Ruskin, but the reformist young painters who rejected the rigid orthodoxies of the Academy" ("Collins' Career in the Visual Arts" 8-9). However, Dolin seems unaware of Collins' rather mixed feelings concerning the practice of the brethren. As for Collins' supposed interest in Ruskin, the correspondence of the former evinces a thorough lack of concern towards the art theories exposed in *Modern Painters*.

Collins' understanding of the complexities to be spotted in the natural world bore little resemblance with the brethren's refusal to admit of any eccentricities in nature: "The most ordinary street-sounds that could occur, at the time and in the place represented", Collins quite explicitly remarked in his "Letter of Dedication", were considered worth rendering in the novel since "by adding to truth, they were adding to tragedy—adding by all the force of fair contrast—adding as no artifices of mere writing possibly could add, let them be ever so cunningly introduced by ever so crafty a hand" (*Basil* 4). His was a praise of ordinariness absent from the Pre-Raphaelite paintings on exhibition at Trafalgar Square barely a year before the publication of *Basil*. By not leaving "the accidental sinuosities of nature ... untouched by the gardener's spade and shears" (Collins, "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 624), his brother Charles had merely added a layer of artifice to his *Convent Thoughts* from which Collins recoiled in earnest. The latter was adamant not to repeat the same mistake in his fiction: "I have not thought it either polite or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only", Collins quite explicitly wrote. "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 ... as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all" (*Basil* 4). It was from this subtle, but complex, interplay between reality and imagination that fiction emerged. Facts beyond the reader's ordinary knowledge could be compelling enough to grasp his attention in a way that staunch descriptions of day-to-day reality were unable to enact. In a way, it can be argued that Collins' suggestion given to his brother of leaving untouched "the accidental sinuosities of nature" guided the composition of *Basil*. The former, I think, was resolved not to be entrapped by the artificiality that notwithstanding seem to pervade *Convent Thoughts*. If extraordinary accidents and events could happen to a few men, he reasoned, then they were as worthy of attention as ordinary ones. To his credit, Collins' interest in the "noblest poetry of prose fiction" never failed him, appealing again to his early conviction in the Preface to the book edition of *No Name* (1862): "It has been my aim to make the character of 'Magdalen' ... a pathetic character even in its perversity and its error; and I have tried hard to attain this result by the least artificial of all means—by a resolute adherence, throughout, to the truth as it is in

Nature” (5).³⁷ The texture of life, Collins went to argue, was a complex interwoven pattern of dark and light threads never easy to disentangle. To disregard the intricacies of human experience could only result in a biased depiction of it—either in canvas or in print. It was a plain truth that set Collins apart from the brethren’s practice.

Indeed, Collins intention of directing his story “towards the light of reality wherever I could find it” (*Basil* 3) brings to mind F. G. Stephens’ aesthetic theories. Stephens, in his essay “Modern Giants” for the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ* (1850), favoured the use in painting of everyday life subjects like “railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels” (qtd. in Werner 65). Instead of recoiling from the quick pace of modern life, Stephens embraced it as worthy of artistic consideration. The pointed realism that pervaded *Basil* echoed Stephens’ theories, and certainly did not go unnoticed by the anonymous critic of the *Westminster Review* who, when reviewing the novel, claimed for painting the very same moral rigidity under which fiction should be written: “He [the artist of the pen or of the brush] may also paint scenes of cruelty and sensuality so gross that his picture will be turned to the wall by those who do not choose to have their imagination defiled” (qtd. in Page 53). Surprisingly, Collins’ amazement seems real when faced against the harsh criticism that ensued. *Basil*, he complained in his correspondence, “has been vehemently objected to as immoral (!) by some of those virtuously inflammable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times who are gifted with particularly sharp noses for smelling out supposititious [*sic*] filth in particularly unlikely places” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 83). That Collins thought even for a while of a warmer critical reception seems extraordinary, although he also relished to a point the bad press earned by the novel: “As I never have written for these people and never will, then their condemnation is infinitely more acceptable than their approval” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 83). It was indeed a bold declaration of intentions that nonetheless omitted the changes made during the composition of the novel in accordance with Richard Bentley’s suggestions. Bentley’s cunning commercial eye immediately foresaw the reaction of the inflam-

³⁷ It was an aim not exempt from difficulties: “This design was not an easy one to accomplish; and it has been a great encouragement (during the publication of the story in its periodical form) to know, on the authority of many readers, that the object which I had proposed to myself, I might, in some degree, consider as an object achieved” (Collins, *No Name* 7).

mable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times which Collins, still a novice in the literary marketplace, seemingly never for a moment thought of.³⁸ Had he read W. M. Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1850), the poor critical reception of *Basil* would not have taken him by surprise. As Thackeray pointed out in his Preface, to give a truthful account of a man of the age meant an almost insurmountable task: "We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional air" for the very simple reason that "society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art" (*Pendennis* 34). It was a simple truth that seemingly never crossed Collins' mind—and all the more remarkable when bearing in mind the recent experience of his Pre-Raphaelite friends, Millais in particular. Frankness in writing entailed heavy risks that should be carefully balanced by any professional of the pen. The non-written rules of sentimentality, Thackeray argued, when dismissed, were a sure recipe for prompting the rage of the guardians of morality. Realism in the novel during the mid-century had rules of its own in England that prevented a similar development to that of France. There was a sort of immobility in the background against which most of mid-century English novels were set, a counterbalancing effect that did not escape Thackeray's sharp analysis. Society, as Collins learnt with *Basil*, only tolerated the natural in art to a certain extent—as long as it did not bother the ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times gifted with particularly sharp noses.

Contemporary reviewers gave a lukewarm reception to Collins' new literary effort. *Bentley's Miscellany* criticised the gross exaggeration of the plot which made of *Basil* "a story remarkable for nothing as much as its intensity—for the powerful excitement which it must produce in every breast, not absolutely containing a mass of stone in place of a human heart" (qtd. in Page 46). The anonymous reviewer summarised the appeal of the novel in the discrepancy between a contemporary setting and the brutality of the incidents related. In *Basil*, "[t]he intense everywhere predominates" (qtd. in Page 46). Collins, he argued, brought situations more proper to the lowest of society to common-place environments presumably untainted by such degrading scenes. The result, questionable as it was, had nonetheless "something artist-like

³⁸ A letter from Collins to Bentley pointed out the changes made to tone down the sexual encounter between Basil's nemesis and his wife: "As I have managed the alteration now, I think the difficulty in the last chapter is got over altogether. If you will look at Folio 104, you will see that I have only mentioned 'the Hotel' as a 'deserted, dreary-looking building'" (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 80).

even in this apparent want of art” (qtd. in Page 47). Collins’ artistic upbringing did not go unnoticed for the reviewer: “But in truth the quarter of that work ought to be called Mr Salvador Fuseli. There is nothing either of Wilkie or Collins about it” (qtd. in Page 45). Neither it was for D. Owen Maddyn when reviewing *Basil* under the cover of anonymity for *The Athenaeum*:

Mr Collins, as the son of an eminent painter, should know that the proper office of Art is to elevate and purify in pleasing. Without the element of pleasurable emotion, colour and design in painting, like eloquence and fancy in literature, will fail to gain our sympathies. ‘Basil’ is a tale of criminality, almost revolting from its domestic hours. The vicious atmosphere in which the drama of the tale is enveloped, weighs on us like a nightmare. (qtd. in Page 48)

Equating knowledge in painting with the practice of writing, the reviewer found baffling Collins’ ignorance of “the proper office of Art”. Maddyn’s criticism echoed that of H. F. Chorley on *Antonina* apropos the vices of the French school and the redeeming qualities of Beauty when applied to Terror.³⁹ Maddyn, as Chorley before, thought that Collins should know better the matter he was dealing with. None of the proper offices of Art were to be found in *Basil*, argued the reviewer, an embarrassing omission bearing in mind Collins’ artistic background: “We had hoped that the author would in his second publication have become more reflective, —and that he would have studied literary art in another school than that to which we fear he has irrevocably devoted himself” (qtd. in Page 47). But the hope proved ill-founded. Collins’ novel was thoroughly indebted to the “aesthetics of the Old Bailey” (qtd. in Page 48), a mere piece of romantic sensibility carefully disguised by an elaborate rhetoric.⁴⁰ Collins’ promising debut, the reviewer argued, had come to an impasse after his surprising enrolment in a thoroughly unwholesome school of fiction that relied on the seemingly inexhaustible accumulation of horrors and included the likes of C. R. Maturin and Eugène Sue. *Basil*, according to

³⁹ Collins, it is worth bearing in mind, wrote *Basil* under a public outcry in England against the curtailment of civil liberties in France under Louis Napoleon (his famous *coup d’état* happened in December 1851).

⁴⁰ The Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, commonly referred to as the Old Bailey for the street where it stands. D. O. Maddyn seems to suggest Collins’ indebtedness to the genre known as penny dreadful which relied heavily on criminal records for its plots. *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) indeed benefited from Collins’ knowledge of them.

the *Athenaeum*, was a deeply flawed work of fiction, a mere tale of criminality unworthy of the reader's attention. Overall, the novel was a disappointment, a view shared by the anonymous reviewer of the *Dublin University Magazine*.⁴¹ Yes, Collins' writing was indeed commendable, but his bold trespass of the limits that bounded the province of fiction could not go unnoticed: "The taste of the age has settled the point, that is proper office is to elevate and purify, as well as to amuse; and unless the writer keep this object constantly before him, he can never hope to win a lasting popularity" (qtd. in Page 50). Provided that Collins chose a better subject for his next literary endeavour, the reviewer argued, a brilliant future awaited him: "Fertile and comprehensive as is the domain of imaginative art, ... it is not too much to expect that [man's] vices, in the lowest abyss of their degradation, should not be selected as the subject of fiction" (qtd. in Page 51). It was precisely Collins' reliance on the worst of human nature that put off the anonymous critic of the *Westminster Review*. Relying heavily on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's preface to *Night and Morning* (1841), quoted at length in the review, the critic concluded that Collins "has given us nothing which can 'take men from the low passions and miserable troubles of life into a higher region'" (qtd. in Page 51-52). He did quite the opposite, actually, choosing on purpose as the basis of the plot a loathsome incident to be ashamed of: "There are some subjects on which it is not possible to dwell without offence; and Mr Collins having first chosen one which could neither please nor elevate, has rather increased the displeasure it excites, by his resolution to spare us no revolting details" (qtd. in Page 52). As the critic of the *Westminster Review* saw it, there was no moral lesson at all to learn from *Basil*, Collins seemingly forgetting that fiction, if thought as an art equal to that of painting, had great aims to achieve:

It matters not much whether the artist hold the pencil or the pen, the same great rules apply to both. He may simply copy nature as he sees it, and then the spectator has a pleasure proportioned to the beauty of the scene copied. He may give a noble spirit-stirring scene, and he will raise high thoughts and great aspirations in those who contemplate it. He may take a higher moral ground, and move to compassion by showing unre-

⁴¹ Though there was a chance of Collins mending paths: "There is a gushing force in his words, a natural outpouring of his sensibility, a harmony, tone, and *verve* in his language that still give us hopes of his one day achieving one work far superior to his present painful and unpleasant tale" (qtd. in Page 48).

versed suffering, 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 by those who do not choose to have their imagination defiled. (qtd. in Page 52-53)

That gross scenes of cruelty and sensuality existed in nature and therefore were susceptible of being copied by an artist *as he saw them* apparently never crossed the reviewer's imagination. Truly, there was a very particular species of fiction whose authors, under the pretence of being inspired by real life accidents, "seem to revel in scenes of fury and passion, such as, happily, real life seldom affords" (qtd. in Page 51). *Basil*, belonging to this very objectionable school, justly deserved the strongest condemnation possible. In Collins' novel, "[t]he incident which forms the foundation of the whole, is absolutely disgusting: and it is kept so perseveringly before the eyes of the reader in all its hateful details, that all interest is destroyed in the loathing which it occasions" (qtd. in Page 52). Readers, the *Westminster Review* concluded, should recoil from *Basil* in earnest.

As a novelist, most of criticism agreed, Collins had a public role to fulfil which was no other than to improve the morals of his readership following the legitimate uses of fiction. It was an aim all the more important when bearing in mind the peculiarities of the English market of books. A large portion of upper and middle class audiences gladly entrusted Mudie's Select Library with the task of choosing books suitable for reading at home—a predominant activity at the time.⁴² Circulating libraries, Mudies' most prominently, "were satisfying the demands made by their costumers, so that their policies in effect mirror the attitudes and desires of the novel-reading public" (Griest 5). They did so certainly to a point, answering their readers' demands but also creating them. When the Victorian *pater familias* borrowed a book from Mudie's he did so knowing that the female minds under his roof were out of moral danger: "We English are unquestionably a domestic people", the *Art Journal* stated in 1850, "everything that partakes of home comforts and enjoyments is dear to us" (qtd. in Wohl 14). Mudie, amongst others, acted as guardian of the unwritten norms of Victorian prudery until the dis-

⁴² By the time of publication of *Basil*, 1852, Mudie's subscribers reached twenty-five thousand (Cruse 315). Such was the success of the library that it moved to new premises in New Oxford Street.

missal of the circulating library system in the last decade of the century. Against this background, the critic of the *Westminster Review* naturally turned against Collins: “The novelist has a high and holy mission”, he quite explicitly pointed out, “for his words frequently reach ears which will hear no others, and may convey a lesson to them which the preacher would enforce in vain” (qtd. in Page 53). Collins, in short, had failed to perform his professional duty. He could not pretend to extract any valuable moral lesson from such a loathsome plot: dwelling as he did “on the details of animal appetite with a persistence which can serve no moral purpose” might eventually “minister to evil passions even while professing condemnation of them” (qtd. in Page 52). People’s mind, as the argument followed, were a tabula rasa prone to defilement by gross “scenes of cruelty and sensuality”. Collins, instead of taking “a higher moral ground” (qtd. in Page 53), embraced vice and degeneracy for its own sake. *Basil* was truly a work of fiction to avoid: “We must, therefore, doubt the taste as well as the judgement of the writer who goes to such a source in order to draw ‘a moral lesson from those examples of error and crime;’ and still less does he merit the thanks of his readers by determining, as he says, ‘to do justice to the intensity of his object by speaking out’” (qtd. in Page 52). However, contrary to the reviewer’s assertions, there is indeed a moral lesson to learn from Basil’s story: the man who surrenders to his basest instincts and suffers accordingly. Dickens, for that matter, thought of the novel highly, praising the story as admirable and written with a precise delineation of character: “I have”, he wrote to Collins, “read the book with great interest, and with a very thorough condition that you have a call to this same art of fiction” (qtd. in Page 49). Dickens’ positive assessment was shared by Émile Forgues in his review of Collins’ novels for the *Revue des deux mondes* (1855). The latter’s assertions as they were exposed in *Basil* “were truly liberal, the sworn enemy of hypocrisy and prejudice and those materialistic tendencies which are the characteristic vices of present-day England” (qtd. in Page 63-64). Consequently, Forgues was not surprised at all by the negative reviews of the novel in the neighbouring country: “It is evident”, he thought of Collins, “that he detests the whining cant and the petty restrictions of a false puritanism” (qtd. in Page 64). Arguably, the accusations of *Basil* being influenced by the so-called French School of fiction were much indebted to that puritanism heartily detested by Collins throughout his long professional career.

The critical backlash against *Basil* did not go unnoticed amongst Collins' friends. As John Everett Millais wrote to one correspondent, "[t]he papers, I understand, abuse it very much, but I think them inconsistent in crying it down and praising *Antonina*, which is not nearly so good" (qtd. in Millais 190). It was an abuse not at all unknown to Millais, still reeling from the critical onslaught that followed his take on the Holy Family with *Christ in the House of His Parents*. However, Collins was working in a field, that of literature, widely exposed to public opinion. Paintings like that of Millais were of very limited access, the science of photography still at its very early stages. A professional of the pen like Collins faced a much broader audience than that of a painter like Millais. And it was quite a demanding one. The peculiarities of the English market of books imposed upon the writer a whole code of morals and obligations aimed at keeping fiction within very delimited bounds. Edmund Gosse, writing in 1891, only a few years before the dismissal of the three-decker volume and the circulating library system, published a lambasting attack upon Mudie's circulating library that summarised the extent of the damage inflicted upon literature in past decades:

the disease which we might call Mudieitis, the inflammation produced by the fear that what you are inspired to say, and know you ought to say, will be unpalatable to the circulating libraries, that 'the wife of a country incumbent,' that terror before which Messrs Smith fall prone upon their faces, may write up to headquarters and expostulate. In all these cases, without doubt, we have instances of the direct influence of democracy upon literature, and that of a deleterious kind. (qtd. in Braker 96)

Gosse's experience in the literary marketplace provided him with a deep insight of the failures of an outmoded system of publication.⁴³ But he seemed surprisingly ignorant of a crucial truth: Mudie's circulating library lasted for so long because, amongst other reasons, customers backed it, confident enough in the savour-faire of the biggest circulating library of the country when protecting the morals of its clients. Theirs was a support that heavily conditioned the

⁴³ George Moore was also well acquainted with Mudie's policy. When the latter refused to purchase copies of *Mummer's Wife* (1885) on charges of immorality, Moore did not remain silent: "The novel of observation, of analysis, exists no longer among us. Why? Because the librarian does not feel as safe in circulating a study of life and manners as a tale concerning a lost will" (qtd. in Cruse 335).

writer's craft for most of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ As Thackeray rightly pointed out, "society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art" (*Pendennis* 34). Consequently, Mudie felt entitled to question the suitability of the commodities upon which his business depended. As a member of the Dissenter community, which thought of novels as works of the devil, Mudie applied a rigorous moral standard to the novels to be circulated by his library—nor by chance called Mudie's *Select Library*. His objections to the title of Collins' *The New Magdalen* (1873) due to its biblical connotations were met with derision by the author, a mere impertinence to be dismissed were not being made by an "ignorant fanatic [who] holds my circulation in his pious hands", as Collins told George Bentley. "Suppose he determines to check my circulation—what remedy have we? What remedy have his subscribers?" (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 2: 387). Certainly not many. Collins well knew how much editors and writers alike relied for their survival on the purchasing policy of the biggest circulating library in the country. Although eventually the novel was published with its intended title, Collins adamant in his refusal to change it, the incident highlights the enormous control exerted by circulating libraries upon the English market of books well into the second half of the century.⁴⁵ Not by chance Collins called Mudie's *Select Library* "the Expurgatory Index of national cant" ("Reminiscences of a Story-Teller" 191). The harsh criticism faced by *Basil* should not have surprised Millais. In fact, one even marvels at Collins' boldness when writing his novel aware as he was of the critical backlash against his brother and close friends.

2.1 THAT SUSPICIOUS GLARE

The main events of *Basil*'s plot develop against the backdrop of the growing suburbia encircling London right at the beginning of the 1850s, a very particular setting already explored by

⁴⁴ "What will Mudie say?" was the invariable question that arose in publishers' offices when a new novel was under consideration. Mudie paid the piper, and on behalf of his large clientele he called the tune" (Altick, *The English Common Reader* 296).

⁴⁵ "Nothing will induce me to modify the title. His proposal would be an impertinence if he was not an old fool—as it is, I cannot for the life of me help laughing at him" (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 2: 387). Collins even thought of taking things further: "It is a question before Billing goes on with the Printing—whether we had better not begin with the Cheap edition—and make it worth the retail bookseller's while to help us. I should not scruple (in that case) to write to the Athenaeum and state (on my sale responsibility) why I cannot trust my book in the Mudie Market. The letter would be reprinted all over England" (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 2: 387). Most probably Bentley's skills averted the confrontation.

Collins in his series of unsigned articles for *Bentley's Miscellany* “The Picture-Galleries of England” (1851). He was truly fascinated by the outskirts of the metropolis:

[a place] even when the gaps of garden grew larger and larger between rows of smart villas; when the dismal ‘preparatory establishments’, for young ladies and young gentleman, dwindled perceptibly in numbers and in size; when little patches of parched grass began to appear by the road-side; when rows of new shops actually stopped short at half a dozen, and showed no symptoms of ever growing any longer—even then, we had not done with the houses. (Collins, “The Picture-Galleries of England” 169)

Suburbia emerges in Collins’ account as a living organism spreading out of control and transforming the city into a kind of labyrinth almost impossible to navigate: “On our route through the western suburbs, ... he gave up all hope of ever getting to the end of London ... No sooner were the new neighbourhoods passed, than the old neighbourhoods began again,—the dusty suburban towns shutting in the high road between the two rows of straggling houses of all shapes and sizes, of all degrees of dirt and discomfort” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 169). Thousands of migrants moved to the metropolis in the years around the mid-century, making of “the dusty suburban towns” a permanent feature of its landscape.⁴⁶ Unbounded commercialism had transformed the geography of London and created a new urban environment that shocked Collins to the core:

No villas now; no new churches; every dwelling is a shop—every inhabitant is a shop-keeper; nobody is a customer, except at the alehouses; nobody appears at the grocer’s but the grocer himself, standing disconsolate at his door; nobody at the chemists but the young apprentice, practising anatomy on his nails with the shop penknife; nobody even in that wonderful ‘Emporium’ of all commodities, where the half-quartern [*sic*] loaves are getting fly-blown already, where a melting lollypop sticks tight to a copy of ‘The Soldier’s Tear,’ where the dust of antiquity lies thick on ginger-bread nuts, balls of cotton,

⁴⁶ According to Roy Porter, 330,000 migrants flooded into the capital between 1841 and 1851. Migration kept a steady flow: “In the 1850s a further 286,000 migrants arrived”, Porter writes, “in the 1860s 331,000” (205). Construction grew exponentially: “London was periodically overbuilt, and within the ceaseless trade cycles of boom and bust there were often more plots and properties than purchasers” (Porter 208).

penny cigars, Jew's harps, and portraits of Jenny Lind. ("The Picture-Galleries of England" 169)

Collins approached suburbia as a desolate environment devoid of the most elemental human interactions, a sort of forgotten amusement park awaiting for customers. Urban life was still to develop in the bleak outskirts of London as depicted in "The Picture-Galleries of England".⁴⁷ Collins' dark view of the worst effects of capitalist development questions any account of the mid-century as a time of prosperity and pacification.⁴⁸ For attentive observers, the incredible quick pace of change affecting the biggest cities of the country was hard to ignore, the landscape surrounding London being indeed quite an extraordinary sight to behold:

First stories are built, and mortgaged by the enterprising proprietors to get money enough to go on with the second; old speculators failed and were succeeded by new; foundations sank from bad digging; walls were blown in high winds from hasty building; bricks were called for in such quantities, and seized on in such haste, half-baked from the kilns, that they set the carts on fire ... —and still the new suburb defied all accidents, and grew irrepressibly into a little town of houses, ready to be let and lived in, from the one end to the other. (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 16)

The effects of untamed commercialism in the urban geography of the capital, that "uncompromising ghastly ugliness" (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 2: 235) permeating every inch of suburbia, provided Collins with the perfect background for his story of modern life.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Alexander's armies were great makers of conquest; and Napoleon's armies were great makers of conquests; but the modern Guerrilla regiments of the hod, the trowel, and the brick-kiln, are the greatest conquerors of all; for they hold the longest the soil that they have once possessed", writes the narrator of Collins' *Hide and Seek* (1856) apropos the growing suburbia of London. "How mighty the devastation which follows in the wake of these tremendous aggressors, as they march through the kingdom of nature, triumphantly bricklaying beauty wherever they go!" (15).

⁴⁸ Collins' fascination with suburbia persisted in his late novels. The evil Doctor Benjulia of *Heart and Science* (1883) "has built a house in a desolate field—in some lost suburban neighbourhood that nobody can discover" (97). The use of houses in isolated areas of London was a recurrent motif in Collins' fiction.

⁴⁹ For similar views on the changing landscape of London see Dyos 51-53.

Basil's love interest, it is worth bearing in mind, came from this bleak milieu where decay seems to be ingrained in the landscape—as it is arguably in her soul. A sort of malaise seemed to spread from the suburban town where the worship of Moloch was widespread.⁵⁰ It is precisely in this forlorn landscape, the suburban town filled with “all degrees of dirt and discomfort” (Collins, “The Picture-Galleries of England” 169), where the eponymous hero of *Basil* finds himself visiting his lover's home. The detailed account of the place provided by Collins is a wondrous rendition of the kind of abode characteristic of suburbia:

Everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly-varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls, with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet; the showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue, and the still showier carpet of red and yellow, seemed as if they had come out of the shop yesterday; the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought; not one leaf even of the music on the piano was dogs-eared or worn. (*Basil* 53)

To Basil, the youngest son of a wealthy landowner with a sound knowledge of what the rule of taste meant, the coarse aesthetic on display in that living room proved hard to cope with. He has intruded into an unknown cultural wasteland, a sort of theatrical stage badly set to convey an impression of fake tasteful discernment. In Basil's own words: “Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this—the eye ached at looking round it” (Collins, *Basil* 53). That is, an eye trained in the most elemental principles of taste. Basil is truly appalled by what he sees at Mr Sherwin's house:

⁵⁰ The trading centres of the country were for Ruskin “monastic establishments in which the roar of the mill-wheel and the crane takes the place of other devotional music; and in which the worship of Mammon or Moloch is conducted with a tender reverence and an exact propriety” (*The Political Economy of Art* 246). The countryside still relatively untouched by the spread of industrialism was specially cherished by Collins: “The fragrant smell of hay comes to us on the breeze; trees and long shady tracts of grass begin to be visible; then rows of carriages, vigilant policemen, peripatetic vendors of ginger-beer, coachmen, footmen, and a long procession of ladies and gentlemen walking up a drive and over a lawn, successively appear in view” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 169).

There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen, hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top, glared on you: the paper, the curtains, the carpet glared on you; the books, the wax-flowers in glass cases, the chairs in flaring chintz-covers, the china plates on the door, the blue and pink glass vases and cups ranged on the chimney-piece, the over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves—all glared on you. There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. (Collins, *Basil* 53-54)

A man whose education is that of a gentleman with understanding enough to justly appreciate the value of the objects around him, Basil's discomfort is triggered by the newness of Mr Sherwin's furnished room. Frank Kermode brilliantly defined Walter Benjamin's aura as "the quality that requires the transposition of the response common in human relationships to our relations with inanimate objects, so that they present us with the past they have absorbed" offering in this way "something different from mere things" (*History and Value* 136). But the objects facing Basil in the suburban villa have absorbed no past at all. On the contrary, they are thoroughly devoid of it, their glare denoting their mass-produced origin. The beholder cannot get a sense of story from mere things unaffected by the passage of time. Mr Sherwin's living room marks a stark contrast with the lodgings of Mannion the clerk, Basil's nemesis: "The paper on the walls was of a dark red; the curtains were of the same colour; the carpet was brown, and if it bore any pattern, that pattern was too quiet and unpretending to be visible by candlelight", the latter noticed. "One wall was entirely occupied by rows of dark mahogany shelves, completely filled with books, most of them cheap editions of the classical works of ancient and modern literature" (Collins, *Basil* 98).⁵¹ Even minor articles of furniture evince a plain and neat order that avoids excesses of any kind, further reinforcing Mannion's condition as professional man and subtly pointing out Mr Sherwin's recent climbing of the social ladder. In the clerk's abode there is nothing of the exacerbated polish and brilliancy of the living room mentioned by Basil where objects "seemed startlingly near to the eye; much

⁵¹ Quite interestingly, Bentley had some experience with cheap editions of novels. According to Bill Bell, "in 1831, for instance, Bentley and Coburn had launched their 6s Standard Novels series, bringing a host of classic titles within the reach of the new reading audience for the first time" (134). It was one of many attempts to break the monolithic rule of the three-volume format.

nearer than they really were” in a way that “the room would have given a nervous man the headache, before he had been in it a quarter of an hour” (Collins, *Basil* 53-54). Indeed, a nervous, or it should be said a sensitive man, would have been taken aback by his inability to approach Mr Sherwin’s objects being as they were mere things to behold upon which no human rapport could be established.

Collins’ description of Mr Sherwin’s living room, to my mind, brings to mind one the commonest complaints about Pre-Raphaelite’s paintings: their brightness and freshness. The brethren even developed a particular technique—the so-called “plain white” put into practice by Millais and Holman Hunt in the early days of the Brotherhood—to give their painting a glossy quality: over a white ground they displayed transparent or semitransparent colours in a laborious process that further removed their canvasses from a pictorial style, that of the Old Masters, characterised by obscurity and dinginess.⁵² Basil’s sort of dizziness when looking at the objects filling the suburban villa echoes that of conservative reviewers when approaching Pre-Raphaelite paintings of dazzling colours and very particular rules of composition. Collins’ descriptive virtuosity, I think, rendered suburbia’s living room as if it were a picture by the brethren, to the point that Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), painted soon after the publication of *Basil*, powerfully resembles Mr Sherwin’s suburban villa. Inevitably, that very same virtuosity brings to mind the role played by photography in Collins’, and the brethren’s, craftsmanship.

As Collins put it, the true purpose of art was the depiction of reality as it was presented in Nature. And it was a purpose made all the more relevant by a burgeoning technique that threatened to revolutionise the practice of painting. A relatively recent invention of past decades, the developing science of photography questioned how accurate the practice of painting was in the depiction of reality: “For the first time”, Walter Benjamin wrote, “photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction—tasks that now devolved solely upon the eye looking into a lens” (“The Work of Art” 253).

⁵² See Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* 197-198.

The skilful craftsmanship of the artist faced a perilous foe: a procedural technique which, despite its rudimentary state, offered astonishing results. It did not take long for the domains of painting and photography to collide as the mid-century advanced. Mabuse's portrait "Edward the Sixth", Collins wrote in 1851, was "an admirable production; admirable for its uncompromising fidelity to Nature, for its daguerreotype truthfulness and reality" ("The Picture-Galleries of England" 164). Photographic processes like the daguerreotype were becoming embedded in the common language of the day, their novelty no longer remarkable enough to be noticed.⁵³ For those reading Collins' criticism, what "daguerreotype truthfulness" conveyed was plainly obvious: an eerie reproduction of reality accurate enough to recall Nature itself. It was only a matter of time for the new photographic science to question the real worth of a canvas. As Tim Barringer points out, "photography and painting would vie with each other through the 1850s to be recognised as the pre-eminent medium of visual truth" (*Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* 83). This competition of sorts was not lost to F. G. Stephens who stressed, in an article for the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*, the effect of technical innovations for the practice of painting:

It has been said that there is presumption in this movement of the modern school, a want of deference to established authorities, a removing of ancient landmarks. This is best answered by the profession that nothing can be more humble than the pretension to the observation of facts alone, and the truthful rendering of them. If we are not to depart from established principles, how are we to advance at all? Are we to remain still? Remember, no thing remains still; that which does not advance falls backward. (qtd. in Hosmon 59)

The rendition of facts in Pre-Raphaelite paintings as they were presented in nature echoed the basic presumption underlying the most advanced scientific practice of the day: "if this adhe-

⁵³ The daguerreotype rendered a black and white image on a light-sensitive, silver-coated copper plate. First introduced in England, in 1841, it took its name from the French Louis Daguerre. A successful scene-painter, Daguerre got word of the experiments being made by Niépce, an amateur in the new science, and from their collaboration emerged one of the most successful commercial enterprises of the mid-century. Daguerre was clever enough to take an English patent and sold expensive licenses to practice the new art. The daguerrotype began a steady decline from the mid-century onwards as more advanced photographic processes developed. See Gernsheim, *The Origins of Photography* 41-50.

rence to fact, to experiment and not to theory, ... has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts?”, Stephens wondered. “It cannot be well to degrade a lesson by falsehood. Truth in every particular ought to be the aim of the artist. Admit no untruth; let the priest’s garment be clean” (qtd. in Hosmon 61).⁵⁴ Photography, although still marred by technical contrivances, was nonetheless capable of rendering an accurate depiction of the world around. Collins had good reasons to equate the “uncompromising fidelity to Nature” so much cherished by the brethren with the employment of the daguerrotype. Back in 1844, Henry Fox Talbot had stressed in *The Pencil of Nature* the advantages of the new science of photography for landscape painters: “One advantage of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature” (qtd. in Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* 85). Talbot’s confidence would have been endorsed by F. G. Stephens.⁵⁵ It was an advantage not immediately perceived by many though, photography at its early stages thought of as a scientific rather than an artistic practice. However, Ruskin was a discordant voice: “I much regret that artists in general do not think it worth their while to perpetuate some of the beautiful effects which the daguerrotype alone can size” (qtd. in Harvey 30-31). Writing in 1851, exactly by the time of Collins’ appraisal of Mabuse’s portrait, Ruskin had done exactly as requested with his daguerrotype plates of the Serenissima to be published in companion folios to *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53).⁵⁶ His suggestion to the brethren, published that very same year in *Pre-Raphaelitism*, of adhering “to their principles and paint nature as it is around

⁵⁴ Following F. G. Stephens’ analysis, it was this search for truth in the sciences that the artist should be compelled to replicate: “That this movement is an advance”, he further elaborated, “and that is of nature herself, is shown by its going nearer to truth in every object produced, and by its being guided by the very principles the ancient pictures followed, as soon as they attained the more power of representing an object faithfully” (qtd. in Hosmon 59). In other words, before Raphael’s practice polluted the art of painting.

⁵⁵ With good reason William Bell Scott, close to the brethren, could claim that photography had been “the seed of the flower of Pre-Raphaelitism” (qtd. in Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* 81).

⁵⁶ The first companion folio was published under the title *Examples of the Architecture of Venice* and Ruskin was adamant in his appraisal: “I have used the help of the daguerrotype without scruple in completing many of the mezzotinted subjects and I much regret that artists in general do not think it worth their while to perpetuate some of the beautiful effects which the daguerrotype alone can size” (qtd. in Harvey 26). He had already enough experience by this time: “Daguerrotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things”, Ruskin wrote in 1845 when in Venice apropos his first experience with the new photographic process. “It is a noble invention” (qtd. in Harvey 25).

them, with the help of modern science” (qtd. in Harvey 31) inevitably brings to mind his praise of the daguerrotype as a useful tool for the artist to turn into. However, what implications such approach meant for the practice of painting Ruskin quite contentedly stopped short of examining.⁵⁷ Be that as it may, it seems clear that for those in the orbit of the brethren the evolving photographic language was not unknown. Therefore, one wonders why Collins never muttered a word of “daguerreotype truthfulness” regarding, for instance, the exquisite attention to detail displayed by his brother Charles’ *Convent Thoughts* aware as he was of the photographic processes available at the time. To my mind, the excessive artificiality of the painting acted as a deterrent, the younger Collins forgetting to leave “the accidental sinuosities of nature” (Collins, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 624) as they were. The other work by Charles Collins showcased at the Summer Exhibition, *May, in the Regent’s Park* (1851), had not been exempt from criticism: “The botanical predominates altogether over the artistical,—and to a vicious and mistaken extreme. In nature there is air as well as earth,—she masses and generalises where these fac-simile [sic] makers split hairs and particularise”, wrote the anonymous reviewer of *The Athenaeum*. “They [the Pre-Raphaelites] take a branch, a flower, a blade of grass, place it close before them and as closely copy it,—forgetting that these objects, at the distance imagined in the picture, and reduced to its scale, could by no means be seen with such *hortus siccus* minuteness” (“Fine Arts: Royal Academy” 582).⁵⁸ These objects certainly might not be seen with such minuteness by the human eye, but the camera lens could well capture them. Talbot’s prediction reverberated in the brethren’s painting. How much were the brethren influenced by the developing science of photography was a criticism

⁵⁷ As it can be implied from a footnote in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* published in 1853: “I intended to have given a sketch in this place of the probable results of the daguerrotype and calotype within the next few years in modifying the application of the engraver’s art, but I have had no time to complete the experiments necessary to enable me to speak with certainty” (qtd. in Harvey 28).

⁵⁸ “Mr Collins show us *May in the Regent’s Park* [sic] from a window in Sussex Place; and so minute is the scale—the very ‘form and pressure’ of the flowers, red, white and blue, and of the shrubs—that we could creep about and through them” (“Fine Arts: Royal Academy” 582).

recurrent enough at the time for Ruskin to rally in their defence once again.⁵⁹ But the suspicion persisted throughout the 1850s. Joseph Beavington Atkinson's detailed criticism is worth reading:

We think, however, we may positively assert that these works [of the Pre-Raphaelites], even if true to nature as she *is*, are at least utterly false to nature as she *appears*. It is, therefore, manifest that these pictures, as translations of nature into art, are utterly untrue and false. This is, indeed, the fundamental error which vitiates all their industry, their pretended honesty and truth. It may be admitted that, in nature, a cube has eight sides, but if an artist should in his picture paint more than three, he violates the possibilities of vision. (170)

For Atkinson, writing in 1857, the brethren, failing to depict nature as it appears to the eye of the beholder, were merely rendering a pictorial falsity—their practice being one that violated the basic principles upon which human vision rested. Atkinson never explicitly mentioned it, but the hint to the depiction of reality as presented by the camera lens pervaded his argument: “Whatever may have been an earlier doctrine, it has now been the practice of several centuries, that the action of a picture must be limited to a moment of time; that, for example, on the same canvas cannot be represented a man going to execution, the scene of his execution, and the subsequent burial” (170). Which was precisely what the manipulation of photographic negatives allowed as Gustav Rejlander showed with his photographic composition “The Two Ways of Life” (1857).⁶⁰ The human eye had limitations of its own. However, Atkinson argued, the brethren seemingly ignored this obvious fact with their misguided rendering of nature:

⁵⁹ “The last forgery invented respecting them is, that they copy photographs”, Ruskin wrote apropos the brethren in 1853. “It admits they are true to nature, though only that it may deprive them of all merit in being so. But it may itself be at once refuted by the bold challenge to their opponents to produce a Pre-Raphaelite picture, or anything like one, by themselves copying a photograph” (qtd. in Waggoner 14). Clearly, *The Athenaeum* reviewer fell short of accusing Charles Collins of doing exactly that. To my mind, Ruskin was becoming aware that his early praise of photography entailed its recognition as a new form of art, which meant for mechanical and chemical process to have the same value that a human capability.

⁶⁰ For an account of the stir caused by Gustav Rejlander's work when exhibited at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition see Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography* 38.

Now, it is this visual and mental, no less than pictorial law, which the English pre-Raphaelites substantially violate in their works. In the ‘Hireling Shepherd’, it may be possible that the eye should mark, for example, each individual hair on the peasant’s head, but, *consequently*, it could not at the same moment see the down on the moth’s wing, or count the ears of corn in the distant field. In order to mark with equal distinctness these varied details, so widely distant points of sight, are needful. Thus this equal emphasis of detail throughout the picture, so fatal to the pictorial effect, arises in the fundamental error, that it is the province of a picture to represent nature as she *is*, not as she *appears*. (170)

But all these varied details, unable to be captured by the human eye, could nonetheless be apprehended by the camera lens, able as it was to depict objects with the aforementioned “*hortus siccus* minuteness” noticed by *The Athenaeum*. What ensued was for Atkinson a thorough debasement of the most elemental rules of art: “This doctrine of aspects and appearances constitutes, in fact, the very philosophy and poetry of art. If art be nothing but a literal transcript of nature, then is picture making mechanical, and the painter’s vocation drudgery”, he wrote. “Art is no longer the rendering of what the poet-mind perceives or feels, but the manual and servile transcript of detail which can be spelt out and counted” (170). Falsity, therefore, pervaded the Pre-Raphaelite practice. Their pretended naturalism was merely materialism of the worst kind, “and in proportion as it is material, ignores the artist’s mind, whose special province it is to compose, to create, and to idealise” (170)—an idealisation, it is worth remembering, against which the brethren had rebelled in earnest when disregarding Reynolds’ aesthetic philosophy. The accusation that Atkinson never formulated clearly, that of the Pre-Raphaelites adopting a technique suspiciously similar to photography, was nonetheless clearly elaborated by the French critic Charles Blanc: “De même qui l’œil inexorable de l’instrument photographique nous apporte des détails éloignés que nous ne qui demandions pas, de même le peintre anglais, croyant toute vérité bonne à dire, nous choque par mille inconvenances, met tout chose sur le meme plan, devient faux à force d’être vrai, et sous prétexte qu’il a pu les voir dans la nature, il offense notre pudeur par tous les scandales de l’écarlate et de l’out-

remer” (qtd. in Pergam 186).⁶¹ Blanc’s complaints, contemporary to Atkinson’s article, addressed straightforwardly the influence of photography in the brethren’s painting. And once more the minuteness scorned by *The Athenaeum* when reviewing Charles Collins’ *May, in the Regent’s Park* came into play. As distant details were given by the inexorable eye of the camera, so a Pre-Raphaelite painting rendered in the same plane a multiplicity of details that the human eye was unable to capture. Atkinson’s “servile transcript of detail” echoes in Blanc’s analysis of the brethren’s technique—as it eerily does in Walter Benjamin’s appraisal of the capabilities of mechanical reproduction.⁶² For the likes of Lady Eastlake, those admirers of painting as the pinnacle of artistic representation, the seemingly unstoppable success of photography as the mid-century advanced aroused conflictive feelings:

For the more perfect you render an imperfect machine the more must its imperfections come to light: it is superfluous therefore to ask whether Art has benefited, where Nature, its only source and model, has been but more accurately falsified. If the photograph, in its early and imperfect scientific state was more consonant to our feelings for art, it is because, as far as it went, it was more true to our experience of Nature. Mere broad light and shade, with the correctness of general forms and absence of all convention, which are the beautiful conditions of photography, will, when nothing further is attempted, give artistic pleasure of a very high kind; it is only when greater precision and detail are superadded that the eye misses the further truths which should accompany the further finish. (460)

In other words, the further the camera moves away from the depiction of reality as is apprehended by the human eye, the further it renders a falsified portrait of nature. Photography at its early stages could well appeal to the artistic sensibilities of the beholder: its lack of accura-

⁶¹ “Just as the inexorable eye of the camera gives us distant details that we did not ask for, in the same way the English painter, believing everything is worth expressing, shocks us with thousands of improprieties, gives all in the same plane, becoming false by force of its truth, and under the pretext that he can see them in nature, he offends our modesty by scandalising us with all the shocks of scarlet and ultramarine”.

⁶² “First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than its manual reproduction. For example, in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not the human eye. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 254).

cy echoed that of the human eye, unable to capture the minutest details in sight.⁶³ But for Lady Eastlake, writing when the 1850s were drawing to a close and new photographic methods had been made available, the better distinctness achieved by the camera lens inevitably betrayed the mechanical nature of the procedure: “Far greater detail and precision accordingly appear”, she wrote regarding photographic portraits. “Every button is seen—piles of stratified flounces in most accurate drawing are there,—what was at first only suggestion is now all careful making out,—but the likeness to Rembrandt and Reynolds is gone! There is no mystery in this” (461).⁶⁴ Eastlake’s criticism was not limited to photographic portraits though: “The falling off of artistic effect is even more strikingly seen if we consider the department of landscape”, she complained. “Here the success with which all accidental blurs and blotches have been overcome, and the sharp perfection of the object which stands out against the irreproachable speckless sky, is exactly as detrimental to art as it is complementary to science” (462).⁶⁵ That sharp perfection—“animals, flowers, pictures, engravings, all come within the grasp of the photographer” (Eastlake 460)—brings to mind once again the “*hortus siccus* minuteness” noticed by *The Athenaeum*. Collins’ brother had rendered a landscape as if his eye were that of a mechanical device: astonishing details and precision filled the canvas, but a thorough lack of artistic feeling pervaded the composition. For Lady Eastlake, there was a huge difference between the achievements of a machine and those of creative genius:

⁶³ To my mind, the fact that Ruskin had praised the capabilities of the human eye against the camera lens in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) might well explain Eastlake’s aesthetic positioning. In the words of Michael Harvey: “Ruskin realised that as the eye looked at a scene it changed its plane of focus so that at any moment a proportion of the scene was indistinct. Also distance diminished observable detail although—and this was Ruskin’s important point—the detail was still there, beyond our ability to perceive it. Thus it was equally false for a painter to represent distant or minute detail as an undifferentiated blob or blurb as it would be to draw it with every delicate nuance of detail” (28-29). Ruskin truly changed dramatically his early praise of the daguerrotype in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* (1856): “Photographs never look entirely clear and sharp ... Photography either exaggerates shadows or loses details in the lights and in many ways ... misses certain of the most subtleties of natural *effect* ... while it renders subtleties of *form* which no human hand could achieve” (qtd. in Harvey 29).

⁶⁴ “[A] photographic portrait, however valuable to relative or friend, has ceased to remind us of a work of art at all” (Eastlake 462).

⁶⁵ “For these reasons”, writes Eastlake, “it is almost needless to say that we sympathise cordially with Sir William Newton, who at one time created no little scandal in the Photographic Society by propounded the heresy that pictures taken slightly out of focus, that is, with slightly uncertain and undefined forms, ‘though less *chemically*, would be found more *artistically* beautiful’” (460).

The power of selection and rejection, the living application of that language which lies dead in his paint-box, the marriage of his own mind with the object before him, and the offspring, half stamped with his own features, half with those of Nature, which is born of the union—whatever appertains to the free-will of the intelligent being, as opposed to the obedience of the machine,—this, and much more than this, constitutes that mystery called Art, in the elucidation of which photography can give valuable help, simply by showing what is not. (466)

Photography, the argument followed, had no place for the imagination of the true artist: “Art cares not for the right finish unless it be in the right place”, Lady Eastlake deemed worth remembering. “Her great aim is to produce a whole; the more photography advances in the execution of parts, the less does it give the idea of completeness” (464). Reading attentively Lady Eastlake’s criticism, one finds echoes of the art orthodoxy against which the Pre-Raphaelites had rebelled in earnest: “Every form which is traced by light is the impress of one moment, or one hour, or one age in the great passage of time”, she wrote. “Though the faces of our children might not be modelled and rounded with that truth and beauty that art attains, yet minor things—the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other—are given with a strength of identity which art does not even seek” (465-466). Art, it went without saying, did not bother with irrelevant things as photography did, concerned as it was with truth and beauty. An obvious fact to Lady Eastlake, and an obvious fact also to Charles Blanc when criticising the Pre-Raphaelites for their misguided belief that everything was worth rendering upon a canvas.⁶⁶ However, both Eastlake and Blanc were writing in 1857 when the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition was showcasing, for the very first time, photographs alongside paintings, drawings and engravings—Rejlander’s “The Two Ways of Life” proving quite a success. They had reason enough to revolt, with photography being boldly proclaimed “Art’s youngest and fairest child” (qtd. in Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography* 35). It was a consideration unthinkable a few years before. Collins, approaching in 1851 Mabuse’s portrait “Edward the

⁶⁶ Blanc’s criticism of Pre-Raphaelite painters for giving “all in the same plane” (qtd. in Pergam 186) echoes that of Lady Eastlake concerning the disadvantages of photography: “The photograph seems embarrassed with the treatment of several gradations of distance. The finish of background and middle distance seems not to be commensurate with that of the foreground; the details of the simplest light and shadow are absent; all is misty and bare, and distant hills look like flat, grey moors washed in with one gloomy tint. This emptiness is connected with the rapidity of collodion, the action of which upon distance and middle ground does not keep pace with the hurry of the foreground” (464).

Sixth” as “an admirable production; admirable for its uncompromising fidelity to Nature, for its daguerreotype truthfulness and reality” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 164), wrote in a time when the camera was understood as a scientific tool rather than a new form of art—at its most, a complement to painting in the lines suggested by Talbot. But things were to change quickly, with Frederick Scott Archer’s wet collodion process being introduced in that very same year.⁶⁷ A much faster process than the daguerreotype, and crucially free from patent restrictions, Archer’s collodion popularised photography enough to justify the alarm of painting devotees like Lady Eastlake. However, as the above-mentioned criticism shows, Talbot’s early expectations of the Photographic Art bringing a multitude of details into prominence had been fulfilled by Pre-Raphaelites like Charles Collins in 1851—although crucially in the domain of painting. The same attention to detail that prompted *The Athenaeum* to condemn *May, in the Regent’s Park* and its *hortus siccus* minuteness had been praised by Charles’ brother Wilkie when looking at *Convent Thoughts*. This was a painting that displayed a “most astonishing minuteness and fidelity to Nature” (Collins, “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 622), qualities all the more remarkable by the use of a colour palette unavailable to any photographic method for decades to come.⁶⁸ But, encouraging as he was, Collins was also concerned to a certain extent by a portrayal of the natural world ignorant of its accidental sinuosities. There was in his brother’s painting a subtle idealisation (or falsification) from which Collins recoiled in earnest, and, I think, explains why he never talked of “daguerreotype truthfulness” when approaching *Convent Thoughts*. Charles Collins’ work lacked the “uncompromising fidelity to Nature” of Mabuse’s portrait, fond as the former was of the gardener’s spade and shears instead of the accidents proper to nature—the painting’s fidelity to the natural world proving relative. Collins’ mild appraisal of the Pre-Raphaelite style of painting, it is worth

⁶⁷ The collodion process began to be popularised in 1851, the very same year of Daguerre’s death, and remained popular for decades: “Up to 1880 collodion was in complete ascendancy wherever photography was practised” (Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography* 9). For a description of the intricacies of the collodion process, see Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography* 10-11.

⁶⁸ Photography remained limited to black and white for a long time, with early photographic processes sensitive only to the blue and ultra-violet regions of the spectrum. For contemporary photographers, Lady Eastlake writes, “[t]he colour green, both in grass and foliage, is now his great difficulty. The finest lawn turns out but a gloomy funeral-pall in his hands; his trees, if done with the slower paper process, are black, and from the movement, uncertain webs against the white sky,—if, by collodion, they looked as if worked in dark cambric, or stippled with innumerable black and white specks; in either case missing all the breadth and gradations of nature” (463). Only in the mid 1870s the spectral sensitivity of photographic plates improved because of the new technique of dye sensitisation. See Harvey 30.

bearing in mind, was written in a time when photography, properly speaking daguerrotype photography, was still an expensive procedure of limited reach. Not even *The Athenaeum* accused Charles Collins of depicting reality as if through a camera lens. The suggestion was always there, but the wider implications of what “daguerreotype truthfulness” meant for painting were still to be fully explored as the mid-century advanced.⁶⁹ Inevitably, when the collodion process made of photography a fashionable hobby and popularised “the sharp perfection of the object” noticed by Lady Eastlake, then critics like Atkinson could look back and justly blame the Pre-Raphaelites for putting into practice fundamental errors. Whether they did so fully aware of his indebtedness to the new language brought about by the camera lens is a completely different question.⁷⁰

Be that as it may, the daguerrotype approach to reality hinted by Collins was to exert a powerful influence on his own writing. In my view, Mr Sherwin’s living room is described in *Basil* with an accuracy of detail that echoes Talbot’s praise for the new science of photography, as if the camera lens had captured the decoration of the place—a kind of literary rendition of the “daguerreotype truthfulness” above mentioned. The objects’ glare, from the wallpaper to the china plates on the door, evinces their condition of mass-produced artefacts devoid of the most elemental human touch and carrying with them a pretentiousness that hurts the educated eye. Indeed, they seem as if only yesterday were taken from the shop, their glare echoing the

⁶⁹ It is blatantly untrue that stereoscopic photography had any influence in the development of Pre-Raphaelitism as Lindsay Smith has argued. Had she ever paid any attention to chronology she would have realised the inconsistency of her argument: “it was only after the French optician Jules Duboscq constructed a number of stereoscopes for the Great Exhibition of 1851 ... that English opticians began to manufacture stereoscopes”, she writes. “Nearly a quarter of a million were sold in London and Paris within three months. In 1854 George Swan Nottage founded the London Stereoscopic Company for the manufacture and sale of lenticular and binocular pictures” (Smith, “The Elusive Depth of Field: Stereoscopy and the Pre-Raphaelites” 87). Both Millais and Holman Hunt’s Pre-Raphaelite paintings for the Summer Exhibition of 1851 had been composed well before Duboscq’s stereoscopes were marketed at the Hyde Park event.

⁷⁰ It may be argued that Ruskin, who at first enthusiastically endorsed the daguerrotype in the 1840s, encouraged the Pre-Raphaelites to adopt a photographic perspective in their works. In *Modern Painters*, Tim Barringer writes, Ruskin “advocated a radical lack of selectiveness that was hitherto the unique preserve of the camera—a device that was assumed to merely record whatever was before it” (“An Antidote to Mechanical Poison” 21). For Ruskin, “‘all things’ in nature, no matter how insignificant, that stood before the lens or before the sketching art student were to be accepted and transcribed without alteration” (Barringer, “An Antidote to Mechanical Poison” 21). Ruskin had been made acquainted with the daguerrotype when in Venice previous to the publication of the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846).

sharpness attributable to the daguerrotype that Ruskin, as many others, found so enthralling.⁷¹ That strange web of space and time that according to Walter Benjamin characterises the aura of the object—“the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be” (*Little History of Photography* 285)—has been distorted, and to a certain extent mocked, by a new system of serial production indifferent to the craftsmanship of the human worker. Mr Sherwin’s objects glare on the beholder to the point of almost blinding him, unable as they are to move further from the status of mere things: “To experience the aura of an object”, writes Benjamin, “we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 339). But it is an experience unavailable to Basil in Mr Sherwin’s furnished room. There is no barrier between object and onlooker, no façade for the latter upon which to further elaborate the story behind the commodities on display: the sphere of tradition has been obliterated by the technology of reproduction.⁷² Mid-century England heralded the advent of a new understating of mass consumption that Benjamin was to scrutinise decades later with critical eye:

Everyday the need to possess the object, from the closest proximity, in a picture—or rather a copy—becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels sleep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of its aura, ... even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction. (*Little History of Photography* 285-286)

⁷¹ At least enthralling enough to capture Venetian architecture in 1845. As Ruskin explained in a letter to his father, taking a daguerrotype “is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself: every chip of stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about proportions” (qtd. in Harvey 25).

⁷² The “unique appearance of a distance” of the aura inevitably hints at the ritual character of the phenomenon: “The essentially distant is the unapproachable; and unapproachability is a primary quality of the ritual image” (Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 338). Benjamin further elaborated this in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” when writing how “[t]he definition of the aura as the ‘unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be’ represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception”, he wrote. “Distance is the opposite of nearness. The *essentially* distant is the unapproachable. Unapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image; true to its nature, the cult image remains ‘distant, however near it may be’. The nearness one may gain from its substance [*Materie*] does not impair the distance it retains in its apparition” (272).

And as it happened with pictures, so it happened with objects traditionally craft-made. Authenticity and reproducibility, Benjamin noticed, are two antithetical terms.⁷³ Neither uniqueness nor durability are to be found in the living room described by Basil. The oppressive newness contained by Mr Sherwin's four gaudy walls is the result of that peeling away mentioned by Benjamin, the removal of the object's shell in order to standardise and, eventually, devoid it of any meaning. Transience and mere copying are indeed characteristics of serial production intended for a mass market: "Now, 'to bring things closer' to us", writes Benjamin, "or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction" (*Little History of Photography* 285). Actually, that inclination was far from a novelty: it had already been spotted by Collins back in the mid-nineteenth century. Basil's eyes had reasons enough to ache when looking at Mr Sherwin's room, technological reproduction being oblivious to the beautiful.⁷⁴ The debasement of Benjamin's aura thrived in the suburban villas encircling London.

2.2 PRECIOUS STUFFS

The very particular environment of London in the mid-century—truly a global metropolis where deeply rooted conventions proved remarkable fragile—best suited Collins for "a study of modern life" as *Basil* was. In this sense, the eponymous hero's complaints against certain kind of women who "appear to be ambitious of morally unsexing themselves before society, by aping the language and the manners of men" (*Basil* 21) would have been unthinkable barely a few decades before. But modern (urban) life meant that old certainties could not be taken for granted. It was indeed astonishing for Basil, and arguably for Collins, to meet, in the packed streets of the British capital, a kind of woman who exhibited "a miserable modern dandyism of demeanour, which aims at repressing all betrayal of warmth of feeling; which abstains from displaying any enthusiasm on any subject whatever; which, in short, labours to make the fashionable imperturbability of the face the faithful reflection of the fashionable im-

⁷³ See Benjamin, "The Work of Art" 271.

⁷⁴ See Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 338.

perturbability of the mind” (*Basil* 21). Being of “exclusively modern order”, these were women who enjoyed “a bastard-masculine licence in their opinions; [and] affect to ridicule those outward developments of feeling which pass under the general appellation of ‘sentiment’” (*Basil* 21). It was a licence that Oscar Wilde, well acquainted with the dandiacal tradition, took to the extreme decades later with his theatrical heroines whose epicenic language became an artifice in itself, an *object d’art* to be enjoyed but never fully understood. For Collins, though, writing well ahead of the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), mid-century women displayed a sympathy tinged with irony “if they ever show it: love seems to be an affair of calculation, or mockery, or contemptuous sufferance, if they ever did” (*Basil* 21). The questioning of traditional roles that lead to the New Woman novel of the 1890s was already noticeable in mid-century London.⁷⁵ Collins’ modern woman, I think, predates that of Wilde by almost half a century, linking the original dandyism of the Regency period as embodied by the Beau Brummell with that of the *fin-de-siècle*. Indeed, the remarkable “fashionable imperturbability of the face” that caught Collins’ attention could well be traced back to the first decades of the century and the dandy’s imperious necessity of differentiation from the common herd. Truly an *arbiter elegantiarum*, or “top of the male *ton*” in the language of the day, credit must be given to Brummell for establishing the cult of clothes as the foremost characteristic of the dandiacal persona: “His clothes seemed to melt into each other with the perfection of their cut and the quiet harmony of their colour”, Virginia Woolf wrote. “Without a single point of emphasis everything was distinguished—from his bow to the way he opened his snuff-box, with his left hand invariably. He was the personification of freshness and cleanliness and order” (*Beau Brummell* 3). Clothing indeed defined the dandy as such. As Thomas Carlyle wrote in *Sartor Resartus* (1836), “his Body and the Cloth are the site and materials whereon and whereby his beautified edifice, of a Person, is to be

⁷⁵ “The New Woman novel”, writes Thalia Schaffer, “... was a wildly popular literary genre about middle-class women’s daily lives it documents a fascinating period of transition away from Victorian separate spheres, recording the stress, anxieties, and freedoms women experienced as they rebelled against traditional roles” (730). Schaffer places the New Woman novel as a result of the cultural and technological changes happening in the late 19th century: “The idea of the New Woman was one of the great causes of the 1890s” (731). However, to my mind, mid-century London saw enough of these changes for Collins to turn against the “miserable modern dandyism of demeanour” of contemporary women.

built” (12).⁷⁶ Through an unusual combination of wit, insolence and assertiveness, Brummell secured his place as *the* authority in matters of taste amongst the fashionable society of the 1810s, truly transforming the city in a stage where the dandy, the well-dressed man, became the main performer. But his was a performance from where outward developments of feeling were excluded. Dandyism, even for its practitioners, reeked of theatricals: “We are all like the ancient actors”, writes the dandy Pelham in Buller-Lytton’s eponymous novel. “Let our faces be ever so beautiful, we must still wear a mask” (171). And, inevitably, any play, no matter how carefully staged, has sooner or later to draw the curtain. Facing enormous debts due to his gambling habits, Brummell went into exile and took refuge in the north of France. Not surprisingly, a slow decadence ensued that lasted well until his death. Brummell’s dandyism, as Woolf cunningly noticed, was the product of a specific time and place: “The peculiar and highly artificial society of London had acted as a preservative; it had kept him in being; it had concentrated him into one single gem” (*Beau Brummell* 5). And once the very particular environment of the metropolis was lost, gone was Brummell’s dandiacal persona.⁷⁷ Little by little, the scaffolding so carefully put together began to crumble: “The odds and ends, so trifling separately, so brilliant in combination which had made up the being of the Beau, fell asunder and revealed what lay beneath” (Woolf, *Beau Brummell* 5). —which was nothing more than immeasurable emptiness. The man who once was on intimate terms with the King of England and whose wit was feared and revered alike passed away in 1840 mostly forgotten. But Brummell’s exile in France did not mean the end of dandyism in his native country. A new set of dandies emerged in the 1820s alongside the fashionable novels or “novels upon manners” of which the aforementioned Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham; or, The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) was perhaps the most successful representative and, paradoxically, the reason for a radical revaluation of the cult of clothes.

⁷⁶ The origin of the word dandy may well be found in the song Yankee Doodle Dandy during the Queen Anne’s War in the American colonies. As it follows, it seems that the song was written by an Englishman to make fun of the American troops: “Yankee Doodle came to town,/Riding on a pony,/Stuck a feather in his hat/And called it Macaroni!”(qtd. in Moers 11). Quite interestingly, the “Macaroni” hinted by the anonymous composer were those Londoners who exhibited a bizarre fancy in their way of dressing—the ancestors of the Regency dandies. As Moers writes, “[t]he reference to the Macaronis probably places a limit on the antiquity of the verse, for the famous Macaroni Club was not founded until 1764” (11). Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1834) makes a passing allusion to the Macaronis as forbears of the dandy (98).

⁷⁷ The dandy was “a creature perfect in external and careless of anything below the surface, a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste” (Moers 13).

Hidden under the pseudonym of Oliver Yorke—"a high-handed, heavy-drinking, proud-speaking fellow who dramatised the blustering spirit of the Fraserians" (Moers 169)—the editor of *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, William Maginn, took on the author of *Pelham* in almost a pathological way: "Nobody knows better than yourself", Maginn wrote of Bulwer-Lytton, "that, to make a fashionable novel, all that is required is a tolerable acquaintance with footmen and butlers ... This will supply the high life, the silver-fork, the no-twice for soup, the ignorance of Bloomsbury Square, the antipathy to cheese and port, and all the other mice *minutiae* which mark the exquisite knowledge of fashionable existence in these excellent volumes" (qtd. in Thrall 110).⁷⁸ For Maginn, fashionable novels were worthless literary commodities that did not deserve the slightest attention, instances of the lowest literary craftsmanship. Consequently, little credit, if any credit at all, should be given to Bulwer-Lytton: "A preparation of five weeks would enable an operative to do *High Life*, or *Pelham*, or *Almacks*, or any of the other jobs of work of the same kind, in the most approved pattern; and, by judicious advertising, they might be all got off hand in the season" (qtd. in Thrall 110). The barrage of criticism that ensued from the pages of *Fraser's Magazine* crucially affected the development of Victorian ideas upon masculinity for decades to come. The dandy emerged as a sort of freak prone to foreign affectation and suspicious effeminacy that stood against the gentleman, the living embodiment of the proud Englishman, a rough and unassuming fellow unconcerned by bizarre fashions. For those professional men devoted to the pen who contributed to the success of *Fraser's Magazine* as a literary commodity, the dandy was laughing stock, and Bulwer-Lytton, with his flamboyant style and bright clothes, a natural target. Not by chance Carlyle wrote *Sartor Resartus* against the success of the so-called "Fashionable Novels", the "*Sacred Books*" of dandyism, amongst which *Pelham*, "who seems to be a mystagogue, and leading Teacher and Preacher of the Sect" (99-100), occupied a prominent place.⁷⁹ Indeed, the whole of *Sartor Resartus*, serialised in *Fraser's Magazine* from November

⁷⁸ *Fraser's* maintained a certain independence of thought during its fifty-two years of existence. Following Thrall, the magazine "was to be one of the most important organs of progressive thought and open revolt in the Victorian age" (6). Far from being a raffish character, Maginn was probably one of the most important editors of the nineteenth century as far as magazines were concerned and also quite a remarkable scholar.

⁷⁹ Carlyle even considered once to write a novel upon the fashionable world: "I once proposed to Mr. Jeffrey to make a sort of sally on *Fashionable Novels* ... The *Pelham* and *Devereux* manufacture is a sort of thing which ought to be extinguished in British literature" (qtd. in Thrall 69).

1833 to August 1834, can be interpreted as Carlyle's contribution to the crusade launched by his editor against the foolery of the cult of clothes. *Sartor Resartus* opened with an attack upon those "straggling broken-winged" thinkers who regarded clothes "as a property, not an accident, as quite natural and spontaneous, like the leaves of trees, like the plumage of birds" (1). These were men, Carlyle argued, guilty of placing an excessive emphasis on clothing: "In all speculations they have tacitly figured man as a *Clothed Animal*; whereas he is by nature a *Naked Animal*; and only in certain circumstances, by purpose and device, masks himself in Clothes" (*Sartor Resartus* 1).⁸⁰ The problem, needless to say, arose when the masquerade, far from being momentary, turned out to be a permanent one. Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* heralded a decade, that of Victorian England, ill-suited to the cult of clothes. The flippancy and fooleries that had characterised the Regency years became increasingly irrelevant in a society favouring virtues such as equality, responsibility and personal commitment. Carlyle quite accurately defined the dandy as "a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress" (*Sartor Resartus* 98)—indeed not a very commendable activity for those men who laboured hard to make a profit from their writing. As Moers accurately wrote, "[t]he ideal of the dandy is cut in cloth" (21). Assailing that ideal in the way that Carlyle did meant the dismissal of the dandy. In fact, such had been the reworking of dandyism made by Maginn and his staff that the phenomenon eventually stood for the antithesis of gentlemanly respectability.

Collins, it is worth bearing in mind, started his professional career in a time when the novels upon manners which ruled over the literary market during his childhood had long gone. Masculine fashion, especially after *Fraser's* take on Bulwer-Lytton, was to encompass for the Victorians a whole new set of meanings hardly comprehensible for those whose mindset was still anchored in the early decades of the century. In Collins' *The Law and the Lady* (1875), the effete and crippled villainous Miserrimus Dexter displays a curious taste in clothes that shocks the heroine of the novel: "His jacket, on this occasion, was of pink quilted

⁸⁰ "The whole external Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES" (Carlyle 26).

silk”, she notes. “The coverlid which hid his deformity matched the jacket in pale sea-green satin; and, to complete these strange vagaries of costume, his wrists were actually adorned with massive bracelets of gold, formed on the severely-simple models which have descended to us from ancient times!” (*The Law and the Lady* 237).⁸¹ Dexter, realising the impact made by his outfit upon the impressionable Valeria, tries to soothe her:

Don’t be surprised. Except in this ignorant and material nineteenth century, men have always worn precious stuffs and beautiful colours as well as women. A hundred years ago, a gentleman in pink silk was a gentleman properly dressed. Fifteen hundred years ago, the patricians of the classic times wore bracelets exactly like mine. I despise the brutish contempt for beauty and the mean dread of expense which degrade a gentleman’s costume to black cloth, and limit a gentleman’s ornaments to a finger-ring, in the age I live in. I like to be bright and beautiful, especially when brightness and beauty come to see me. (*The Law and the Lady* 237)

However, contrary to Dexter’s assertions, there was a time in the ignorant and material nineteenth century when precious stuffs and beautiful colours were not unknown to men. Collins’ hero in *A Rogue’s Life* (1856) is a case in point: “My present costume was of the dandy sort—rather shabby, but gay in colour and outrageous in cut” (133). That gayness, as well as that outrageousness, were indebted to Bulwer-Lytton’s very particular strand of dandyism in the years that followed Brummell’s exile when the plot of the novella is set.⁸² *Fraser’s* take on it proved quite effective as far as Collins’ rogue goes: “[i]t would be safer to assume a serious character—to shave off my whiskers, crop my hair, buy a modest hat and umbrella, and dress entirely in black” (*A Rogue’s Life* 134). To dress in black cloth as Dexter mentioned, to follow the pattern of respectability and submission to social conventions—in other words, to con-

⁸¹ Collins’ *The Law and the Lady* (1875), it is worth bearing in mind, was published when a young Oscar Wilde was still attending Oxford and reading, or just about to read, Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of Renaissance* (1873).

⁸² As Lady Holland wrote of the Count D’Orsay, one of the foremost dandies of the 1830s: “[h]e wears his shirt without a neckcloth, fastened with diamonds & coloured stones, in short a costume that *men* disapprove as effeminate and nondescript” (qtd. in Moers 154). Brummell favoured a much more restrained display of fashion with white shirts, blue coat, beige trousers and black boots. Thackeray wrongly applied a later phase of dandyism to his depiction of the phenomenon in *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848). The fashion excesses that he attributed to the dandyism of the 1810s belonged to the post-Brummell period.

form with the ideal of masculinity embodied by professional men—was a lasting outcome of the attack mounted by Maginn and his men.⁸³ But the cult of clothes, nonetheless, did show an extraordinary resilience and adaptability with a “miserable modern dandyism of demeanour” (*Basil* 21) reaching the very beginning of the mid-century regardless of the savagery displayed by the staff of *Fraser’s*. However, this was a dandyism of a very peculiar kind as Collins so cunningly noticed in his story of modern life, not so much focused on the cult of clothes but in a fondness towards artifice that bore no resemblance whatsoever with past manifestations of the phenomenon upon English soil. Indeed, to a certain extent, this was a foreign import.

Ralph, Basil’s eldest brother, returns home after a prolonged stay in Paris displaying “miniature toys in gold and jewellery hung in clusters from his watch-chain; his shirt-front was a perfect filigree of lace and cambric ... He brought with him his own boxes of choice liqueurs and perfumes; his own smart, impudent, French valet; his own travelling bookcase of French novels, which he opened with his own golden key” (*Basil* 17). Ralph comes back transformed into a “super-exquisite foreign dandy” (*Basil* 17), displaying a foreign lifestyle soon felt in the family abode. As Basil notices, “it was as if the fiery, effervescent atmosphere of the Boulevards of Paris has insolently penetrated into the old English mansion, and ruffled and infected its quite native air, to the remotest corner of the place” (*Basil* 17). The French capital, one of Collins’ favourite vacation spots, lived up to its reputation as the city of luxury and debauchery amongst respectable Englishmen. Arguably, that pollution of native air noticed by Basil is all the more shocking bearing in mind the pivotal role of the country house in the collective psyche of the nation. A repository of old values and customs left untainted by the modern corruption of manners, in Collins’ story of modern life the old English mansion eventually surrenders to the tide of progress imported from Paris. Equating modernity with a modern disease that once spread is impossible to contain, Collins’ England is under siege by an influenza of modern customs all the more dangerous because of its foreign provenance. To Basil’s shock, Ralph does not even hesitate in displacing “a beautiful little ebony cabinet which had

⁸³ The Dickens of the 1830s, for instance, parading a flashy and extravagant apparel, bore no relation whatsoever with his mid-century subdued public persona. See Moers 256.

been in the family three hundred years; and set up in its stead a Cyprian temple of his own, in miniature, with crystal doors, behind which hung locks of hair, rings, notes written on blush-coloured paper, and other love-tokens kept as sentimental relics” (*Basil* 17). Basil’s dandified brother rejects his country’s native traditions in favour of Parisian artifice. Three hundred years of lineage are disposed of, replaced by a cheap reworking of pagan motives honouring coarse sentimentality. Collins’ Ralph, I think, predates Huysman’s *des Esseintes* by almost forty years. Ralph’s devotional, almost fanatical, attachment to beauty does indeed obliterate any inherited consideration towards tradition: “Family portraits that hung there, were turned to the walls and portraits of French actresses and Italian singers were stuck to the back of the canvasses” (*Basil* 17).⁸⁴ Truly, this “super-exquisite foreign dandy” shatters to the core the foundations upon which the social body of the country rested.⁸⁵ The blame, however, is not to be entirely put on the neighbouring nation.

Ralph, previous to his gallic adventure, took “the cut of his coat and the tie of his cravat” from “young tutors with a tendency to dandyism” (*Basil* 15). The spectacle of Paris might well have dazzled Basil’s stray brother, but his foreign dandyism still betrayed its original provenance. It was in France, as Moers cunningly pointed out, that “Anglomania made the dandy and the romantic one and the same, though the two had scarcely met at home” (121). Collins’ Ralph is the unexpected outcome of that encounter. Indeed, Brummell’s residence in the northern shores of the Gallic country did not go unnoticed, with Jules Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Du dandysme et de George Brummel* (1845) rescuing the Beau from anonymity and making of dandyism a sort of literary fashion with a tinge of intellectual revolt. D’Aurevilly’s reinterpretation of the dandiacal tradition, firmly grounded in the Eng-

⁸⁴ However, Collins takes a poetic revenge of sorts. Towards the end of the novel Ralph retires to a suburban villa in the outskirts of London, the same place where his young brother had been shocked by the display of cheap commodities and coarse taste of the rising middle class.

⁸⁵ In *The Moonstone* (1868), arguably Collins’ most successful novel alongside *The Woman in White* (1859), Mr Franklin Blake is described as “a bright-eyed young gentleman, dressed in a beautiful fawn-coloured suit, with gloves and hat to match, with a rose in his button-hole, and a smile on his face”, who happens to be the fatal result of “the varnish of foreign parts” (26). Never for a moment dandyism is mentioned in the novel, although Collins clearly wrote the character of Mr Blake with the phenomenon in mind. Again, the neighbouring country is the reason for this malaise: “So much for foreign education!”, the house-steward Gabriel Betteredge remarks on Mr Blake. “He has learned that way of girding at us in France, I suppose” (*The Moonstone* 36).

lish Regency, crucially influenced both Baudelaire and Huysmans.⁸⁶ Theirs was a revamped dandyism that did not entirely break with the past: the dandiacal novels of Bulwer-Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli, of great success in France, reached Baudelaire distilled by d'Aurevilly's book.⁸⁷ A rather unintended consequence of Brummell's exile, once in France the English cult of clothes became entangled with the devotion towards artifice that pervaded French literature. What Collins' Ralph brought to England was a development of dandyism that Wilde took to the extreme in the last decades of the century. Cyprian temples erected in the place of old family antiques were a sign of things to come. Eventually, France, the country that received dandyism from England through Brummell's exile and the success of fashionable novels, provided the phenomenon with a new lease of life. Crucially, Collins published *Basil* almost ten years ahead of Baudelaire's *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), with its depiction of the masculine persona devoted to elegance much indebted to d'Aurevilly's book. Portraying the dandy as a sort of aristocrat of *gout*, Baudelaire refined a conception of dandyism tinged by "l'élégance matérielle". If Brummell played with his condition of *arbiter elegantiarum* amongst a very limited and cultured audience, the dandy as rendered in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* appealed to the crowd, the ignorant masses that rambled through the great Parisian boulevards. Baudelaire truly transformed the character into "the aristocrat of democracy" (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Taste* 95). But, to my mind, the proselytising of beauty had an earlier evangelist in Collins' story of modern life. Ralph, a "super-exquisite foreign dandy" (*Basil* 17), is a product of that mingling of English dandyism and French romanticism cleverly noticed by Moers. The exhilarating atmosphere of the Parisian thoroughfares enticed Basil's brother way before Baudelaire's paean to the dandy. To my knowledge, no credit has been given to Collins' novel as an earlier precursor to the peculiar mixture of aestheticism and dandyism later deployed by Wilde, an approach towards the beautiful heavily indebted to mid-century French *litterateurs*.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ "Dandy biographies, Regency memoirs, fashionable novels were not reading matter for serious people in mid-century England. But mid-century France was different" (Moers 256).

⁸⁷ Another case in point was Theophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) as Maurice Beebe noted in his seminal study *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (1964).

⁸⁸ Moers surprisingly cites Collins' *The Law and the Lady* (1875) as an earlier precursor of this connection between dandyism and aestheticism blatantly ignoring *Basil* (1852). See Moers 241-242.

Indeed, Collins' story was one of modern life, reflecting the mid-century tensions between the yearning for older upper-class virtues such as "gentlemanliness, domesticity, family, and womanliness" and the ruthless attitude of a urban society dismissive of tradition and little attached to forlorn prejudices.⁸⁹ Collins well knew that the push of modernity was strong enough for family portraits to be turned against the walls. It took only a short leap of imagination to realise that in the ensuing years the consumption of beauty was to become a disputed battleground. The many were soon to demand a share in the joys of aesthetic contemplation previously limited to the few, but, crucially, they were to do so without Ralph's aesthetic discernment. Mr Sherwin's living room gave Basil's readers a not too enticing forecast of aesthetic democracy when left untrammelled.

2.3 COVETABLE THINGS

Robert Owen's *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System* (1815) still remains a valuable observation of the long historical process that would lead to the mid-century commodity culture of suburbia. Owen, living in a society already affected by a burgeoning capitalist system, immediately perceived the changes brought by it: "Those who were engaged in the trade, manufactures, and commerce of this country thirty or forty years ago, formed but a very insignificant portion of the knowledge, wealth, influence, or population of the Empire" (3).⁹⁰ However, by the time of composition of the *Observations*, that was no longer the case. The country had suffered enormous transformations: "Prior to that period, Britain was essentially agricultural", Owen reflected. "But from that time to the present, the home and foreign trade have increased in manner so rapid and extraordinary as to have raised commerce to an importance, which it never previously attained in any country possessing so much political power and influence" (3). The spectacular increase in the volume of the foreign trade, mainly due to the cotton industry, led to fatal consequences for the stability of the social

⁸⁹ As Dolin and Dougan noted, those were the virtues "aspired to by the emergent mid-Victorian middle classes: the virtues of home" (5).

⁹⁰ Owen seems to be one of the first English authors employing the term working class in 1813 when writing about the "poor and working classes" (qtd. in Williams, *Keywords* 54). Raymond Williams points out the different uses made of the term: "working classes ... is singular from the 1840s but still today alternated between singular and plural forms, often with ideological significance, the singular being normal in socialist uses, the plural more common in in conservative descriptions" (*Keywords* 55).

body of the country to the point of Owen being daunted by the challenges ahead: “The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants; and as this character is formed upon a principle quite unfavourable to individual or general happiness, it will produce the most lamentable and permanent evils, unless its tendency be counteracted by legislative interference and direction” (5). At the bottom of Owen’s analysis lies a common complaint in the political thought of the time: the destruction of the supposed Arcadia inhabited by the English peasant due to the effects of an expanding manufacturing system. An “essential change in the character of the mass of the people” was happening under Owen’s eyes “and, ere long, the comparatively happy simplicity of the agricultural peasant will be wholly lost amongst us” (5). That simplicity certainly did not stand a chance in an evolving commercial environment. According to Owen, “the acquisition of wealth, and the desire which it naturally created for a continued increase, have introduced a fondness for essentially injurious luxuries among a numerous class of individuals, who formerly never thought of them, and they have also generated a disposition which strongly impels its possessors to sacrifice the best feelings of human nature to this love of accumulation” (5). According to this view, greed seemed to guide people’s actions, with the changes brought by capitalist development in the first decades of the century still reverberating decades later. Basil’s father had good reasons to complain about his son’s friendship with a “money-lender tradesman” (*Basil* 159).

Reading Owen’s *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System* immediately brings to mind Thomas Carlyle’s complaints about the new industrial society he was living in: “Were we required to characterise this age of ours by nay single epithet”, the latter wrote in the 1830s, “we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the age of Machinery, in every outwards and inward sense of that word ... Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance” (qtd. in Tennyson 34). The craftsman who had previously earned his living through the use of his very particular skills now faced a totally different environment, forced to add “the art of earning money to his craft” (Arendt 143). And it was not a small change. Carlyle’s complaints, although slightly exaggerated, were nonetheless a valuable reflection on the future of craftsmanship in a commodity culture increasingly dependent

on mass production. In this sense, Collins' *No Name* (1862) provides a wondrous account of mid-century fordist production *avant la lettre* through the portrayal of the scoundrel Captain Wragge: "The place in which my Pill is made, is an advertisement in itself", Wragge proudly tells of his shop. "Behind one counter (visible to the public through the lucid medium of plate-glass), are four-and-twenty young men, in white aprons, making the Pill. Behind another counter, are four-and-twenty young men, in white cravats, making the boxes. At the bottom of the shop are three elderly accountants, posting the vast financial transactions accruing from the Pill, in three enormous ledgers" (*No Name* 711). Wragge's shop is a factory for the mass production of commodities intended to be purchased by those empowered by the wave of capitalist development engulfing the country: "They can't get rid of my Pill—they must take us", says the Captain summing up one of the key rules of any capitalist society: the purchasing of non-essential goods for the mere sake of it. What emerges is a phantasmagoria of sameness only reinforced by a price tag that obliterates distinctions amongst commodities.⁹¹ This intoxicating quality of commodity economy has cunningly been apprehended by Wragge in his merciless pursuit of easy profit. By the 1860s when Collins wrote *No Name* the reach of capitalist development was undeniable: "There is not a single form of appeal in the whole range of human advertisement, which I am not making to the unfortunate public at this moment", boldly proclaims Wragge. "Hire the last novel—there I am, inside the boards of the book. Send for the last new Song—the instant you open the leaves, I drop out of it. Take a cab—I fly in at the window, in red" (*No Name* 711). The "vast financial transactions" collected from Wragge's Pill bear testimony to the success of advertisement as a tool to exploit capitalism's resources. With good reason could Eric Hobsbawm refer to the decades after 1848 as the definite consolidation of capitalism: "It was the triumph of a society which believed that economic growth rested on competitive private enterprise, on success in buying everything in the cheapest market (including labour) and selling in the dearest" (1). Arguably, the Captain's achievement was made possible at all by that new environment where competitive private enterprise signalled the path to success. Collins' depiction of mid-century commercial society confirmed Carlyle's worst fears. As the years went by, a large "new class of potential purchasers of non-essential goods" were "experiencing the pleasures and pains of consumer

⁹¹ See Benjamin, "Exchange with Adorno" 208.

choice on a scale hitherto unknown” (Waters 3). Indeed, it was a scale never seen before. Collins’ Captain Wragge built his success on the fondness for injurious luxuries noticed by Robert Owen decades ago: “They can’t get rid of my Pill—they must take us”. Indeed, the Victorians were spellbound by the amplitude of their consumer choices. Collins’ readers were living under Carlyle’s “Mechanical Age” to an extent never imagined.

The writing of Collins’ story of modern life, it is worth bearing in mind, ran parallel to the Great Exhibition of 1851. The hundreds of commodities displayed in the gigantic steel and glass pavilion erected at Hyde Park were intended as an assertion of England’s manufactural prowess, Mr Sherwin’s gaudy walls bearing testimony to the consequences of an economic system under which even a linen draper could boast of a (dubious) standard of taste. As Raymond Chapman rightly pointed out when writing about the Victorian age, “[t]here was little enthusiasm in the early period for antique furniture: the old was merely the old-fashioned” (6). The mass production of cheap commodities best suited a rising middle class still in the process of configuring its own set of values and prejudices. Never for a moment the likes of Mr Sherwin thought of opening the morocco-bound picture books that lay on their tables. They did not see a reason for it. In Collins’ *Basil*, suburbia emerges as the playground of those who, in their desperation to reach an elusive social and cultural status, make of pretentiousness their *carte de visite*: “A rich man ought to be continually examining how he may spend his money for the advantage of other”, Ruskin wrote in his *Political Economy of Art* (1857), “at present, others are continually plotting how they may beguile him into spending it apparently for his own” (227). Mid-century bourgeois industrial society, Ruskin argued, was far from being a friendly environment: “The aspect which he [the rich man] presents to the eyes of the world is generally that of a person holding a bag of money with a staunch grasp, and resolved to part with none of it unless he is forced, and all the people about him are plotting how they may force him; that is to say, how they may produce things that he will covet and buy” (*Political Economy of Art* 227). The coarse taste on display in Mr Sherwin’s living room was the result of an economic system aimed at the mechanical production of covetable (and disposable) things for those lucky enough to hold a bag full of money. For Ruskin, and it

can be argued for Collins as well, there was no doubt about the pernicious effects brought about by this system. Suburbia, as rendered by the latter in *Hide and Seek* (1856), emerges as the abode of “the three distinct subdivisions of the great middle class of our British population” (16).⁹² The country has never seen anything like it before, its social body altered almost beyond recognition by a new commodity culture that chased the man of money wherever he went: “One man tries to persuade him that he wants perfumes; another that he wants jewellery; another that he wants sugarplums; another that he wants roses at Christmas” (Ruskin, *The Political Economy of Art* 228). Collins’ Captain Wragge lived up to that description. Little good could be expected from this situation, Ruskin argued, since “anybody who can invent a new want for him is supposed to be a benefactor to society: and thus the energies of the poorer people about him are continually directed to the production of covetable, instead of serviceable things; and the rich man has the general aspect of a fool, plotted against by all the world” (*The Political Economy of Art* 228-229). It was a general aspect, that of a fool, made even more noticeable by the awful aesthetic quality of these covetable things denounced by Ruskin and contained in the four gaudy walls of Mr Sherwin’s abode. Crucially, they were far from an exception in the new neighbourhoods sprouting around the great cities of the country: “Long word-pictures of the suburbs of London, their interior, and similar things, are wearisome”, wrote the anonymous reviewer of *The Spectator* on *Basil*, “because they are mere repetitions of familiar common objects” (qtd. in Page 54). But that was precisely Collins’ point: how common these objects had become to the point of being no longer noticeable. To his credit, he realised that mid-century England was perilously verging towards “an aesthetic economy inflated by an abundance of new disposable income” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89) never experienced before. The ensuing debasement of the rule of taste was hardly surprising. Mr Sherwin’s new disposable income allowed him to buy “over-ornamented chiffoniers” and filled them “with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves” (*Basil* 53) which no doubt satisfied his innermost desires for social aggrandisement.

⁹² “Rents and premises were adapted, in a steeply descending scale, to the means of the middle classes with large incomes, of the middle classes with moderate incomes, and of the middle classes with small incomes. The abodes for the large incomes were called ‘mansions’, and were fortified strongly against the rest of the suburb by being all built in one wide row, shut in at either end by ornamental gates, and called a ‘park’. The unspeakable desolation of aspect common to the whole suburb, was in a high state of perfection in this part of it” (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 16-17).

And as Mr Sherwin did, so many others followed suit. Suburbia was a force to be reckoned with in the new aesthetic economy emerging during the mid-century. And Collins was not the only one to notice it.

A commission from the wealthy Mancunian industrialist Thomas Fairbairn, Holman Hunt's painting *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) depicts the moment when a mistress feels a spiritual revelation of sorts whilst sitting on the lap of her lover.⁹³ And their abode? One of the many houses in "the dusty suburban towns" referred by Collins.⁹⁴ The painting, lacking the "mythical, allegorical or historical subjects" (Dolin 15) that art orthodoxy posited as essentials of High Art, enraged critics by what they deemed to be an explicit endorsement of debauchery and low morals. Such was the outrage that ensued that John Ruskin, once again, felt compelled to intervene: "There is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar (in the vulgar sense, as it may be)", he wrote in his 1854 review for *The Times*, "but it becomes tragical, if rightly read" (qtd. in Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 304). Ruskin approached Holman Hunt's painting as a valuable moral lesson to look at: "That furniture, so carefully painted even to the last vein of the rosewood—is there nothing to be learnt from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home? Those embossed books, vain and useless—they also new—marked with no happy wearing of beloved leaves" (qtd. in Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 304). Ruskin's analysis could well be applied to Mr Sherwin's living room in Collins' *Basil*.⁹⁵ There was indeed something to learn from "that terrible lustre of it": the rise of a new aesthet-

⁹³ However, the woman's expression of blissful joy for which the painting is well known today was the result of several modifications made by Holman Hunt through the years—originally there was a look of horror and pain in her face that Fairbairn asked to be removed.

⁹⁴ According to Peters, the relationship between William Holman Hunt and the model Annie Miller, an illiterate working girl and the model for *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), seems a probable source of inspiration for Collins' *Basil*. In 1850 Holman Hunt started a stormy relationship with the red-haired Annie Miller that lasted for the next thirteen years without, according to Millais, any kind of sexual intercourse. It was clear for most of the people that in spite of Hunt's efforts "to turn her into marriageable material, Annie was not likely to prove a chaste and reliable companion" (Peters 116-117).

⁹⁵ "Whilst direct collusion is unprovable", Kate Flint writes, "we can, importantly, say that painter and novelist shared a common mode of looking at both furniture and gesture, regarding both as social and moral indicators" (52).

ic that owed nothing to the highbrow taste of past decades but instead relished on coarseness for the sake of it. Collins had been clever enough to notice the new understanding of beauty growing in the villas encircling London, a fondness for mass-produced industrial commodities whose shine proved enticing enough for a growing new class of consumers devoid of the most elemental aesthetic sensibility. Ruskin's chivalrous understanding of culture prevented him from comprehending the complex social and cultural landscape of the mid-century. The likes of Mr Sherwin were far from horrified by the "fatal newness" of their furniture. Actually, they were quite proud of it. Yes, everything was oppressively new in the room painted by Holman Hunt as it was in the villa filled with aesthetic monstrosities depicted by Collins. The furniture and objects of *The Awakening Conscience* look indeed "as if they had come out of the shop yesterday" (*Basil* 53)—and most probably they did. The embossed books rendered by Holman Hunt are as useless as those described in Collins' novel, a byproduct of an economic system thoroughly estranged from highbrow conceptions of taste. In a middle-class society that valued the endless consumption of commodities instead of the true appreciation of culture, the mere thought of books marked by the happy wearing of beloved leaves was simply preposterous. They were mere decorative objects devoid of any real value and as such deserved little, if any, consideration. Culture, in the world of suburbia, was not meant to be enjoyed, only displayed for the sake of social recognition. Henry Morley's "A House Full of Horrors" (1852), published in *Household Words* the very same year of Collins' novel, further reflected this changing mid-century aesthetic landscape.

Morley's piece was written as a result of his visit to the exhibition "False Principles in Design" at Malborough House, popularly known as the Chamber of Horrors, and organised with the intention of educating the English public in the perils of a coarse taste when decorating their houses. Their demands for constant novelty, it was thought, were undermining the progress of good ornamental art.⁹⁶ Morley's Mr Crumpet was indeed impressed by the exhibition: "For the last five weeks I have been haunted by the most horrid shapes. When I get into the omnibus I ride home silent, for I see, nine times out of ten, in some corner or opposite to me, nestling on a friend's bosom, or in his lap, unobserved by himself, some dreadful

⁹⁶ For a valuable discussion on this topic see Catherine Waters' *Commodity Culture in Dicken's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods*.

thing” (“A House Full of Horrors” 60). However, to Mr Crumpet’s shock, dreadful things were not confined to the omnibus:

When I come home a dozen hideous forms glare at me in the hall. My snug parlour maddens me; the walls and floor are densely covered with the most frightful objects; a detestable thing lies spread out at full length before my fire; the persons of my wife and daughter are surrounded very often by these horrors. When I draw the curtains and shut in my room I shut myself in with all these terrible companions, whose hideousness is visible alone to me ... It is not in this chamber that I only suffer; my whole house is full of horrors, and I meet them in the streets. (Morley, “A House Full of Horrors” 60)

Mr Crumpet’s concern brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s social approach to the aura’s decay which he links to “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness [Überwindung des Einmaligen jeer Gegebenheit] by assimilating it as a reproduction” (“The Work of Art” 255). Arguably, that concern was plainly visible in mid-century London for attentive observers like Mr Crumpet. The “frightful objects” that terrified him, probably of very recent acquisition, were stripped of the aura’s veil as referred by Benjamin. Little option had the beholder left but to recoil in earnest: “Warmth is ebbing from things”, Benjamin wrote. “The objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us ... We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death, and handle their spines with infinite dexterity, if we are not to perish by bleeding” (qtd. in Jennings 26).⁹⁷ Basil’s heartfelt repulsion when facing Mr Sherwin’s obnoxious taste echoed in Morley’s Mr Crumpet. Indeed, the lessons taught by the Department of Practical Art at Marlborough House proved to be of great value to the latter: “As old horrors wear out, I shall replace them according to correct principles of Taste” (Morley, “A House Full of Horrors” 61). Which these principles were re-

⁹⁷ As Michael Jennings has remarked, Benjamin’s analysis of what he called the “sex-appeal of the anorganic” is heavily indebted to his very particular interpretation of Marx’s concept of reification. The commodity, far from being a trivial thing, possesses “sinnlich übersinnlich” (sensuous, yet extrasensory) properties. Having a sort of life of its own, the commodity establishes a relationship of sorts with another commodities and with men: “Marx attempted to explain this phenomenon metaphorically”, Jennings writes, “he referred to the propensity of commodities to form networks of significance and influence as their ‘fetishism’” (26).

mains a mystery, but, bearing in mind the cheap price of mass-produced commodities, chances are of Mr Crumpet choosing wisely: “Whenever anything new is to be bought, since it will cost no more to have a thing in right taste than in wrong, I mean to be particular about the choosing of it” (Morley, “A House Full of Horrors” 61). Morley’s short piece, notwithstanding its irony, reflects a fundamental social and cultural change in the private life of the social body of the country. To apply the correct principles of taste in the purchase of commodities for the home was quite a novelty amongst middle-class families until the mid-century. But the incredibly rapid pace of capitalist development and the new modes of industrial production thoroughly altered the purchasing habits of the likes of Mr Crumpet. With good reason he could boast of the availability of new cheap commodities to fill his house. The booming factories spreading through the country supplied a growing middle class with multitude of new products in a never-ending cycle of production and consumption. Their aesthetic quality, however, remained controversial: “The restless demands of the public for constant novelty”, noted the *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, “are alike mischievous to the progress of good ornamental art as they are to all commercial interests” (qtd. in Briggs, *Victorian Things* 76).⁹⁸ The glare of hideous forms noticed by Mr Crumpet—the very same glare that shocked Basil when visiting Mr Sherwin’s living room—was the inevitable consequence of an overabundance of mass-produced covetable things that nourished “the spurious freedom” that involved “the fallacy of ‘Every one to his own taste’” as denounced by the editor of *The Journal of Design and Manufactures* (iii). The tensions derived from the project of aesthetic democracy were plainly visible at the very beginning of the mid-century for those willing to see. Ruskin, when approaching Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*, had no doubts: the outskirts of England’s great cities were the background for a cultural apocalypse of sorts. Now linen drapers thought of themselves entitled to the joys of aesthetic discernment regardless of their absolute ignorance. It was an absolute novelty unthinkable of a few decades before. Collins, who had spotted this innovation when rambling through the forgotten neighbourhoods of the metropolis, wrote his story of modern life when the likes of Mr Sherwin were growing bold: “I had the great pleasure, Sir, and profit, and—and, indeed, advan-

⁹⁸ Founded in 1849, the *Journal of Design and Manufacture* reflected the newly acquired importance of (good) design in mid-century England amongst cultured circles.

tage—of being shown over your town residence last year, when the family were absent from London”, explains the linen draper to the eponymous hero of Collins’ novel. “A very beautiful house ... A treat; quite an intellectual treat—the furniture and hangings, and so on, arranged in such a chaste style—and the pictures, some of the finest pieces I ever saw—I was delighted—quite delighted, indeed” (*Basil* 63). A shallow, thin man with features shaken by nervous contractions, Mr Sherwin feels entitled to judge the interior decoration of Basil’s family home as if they were equals in the knowledge of aesthetic appreciation. The “weakness of rank-workshop and wealth-worship” (*Basil* 60) noticed by Collins emboldened this linen draper to the point of having a say about the interior decoration of a home belonging to the landed gentry of the country. Capitalist development had truly effected a social and cultural revolution in the social fabric of the country. Aesthetic democracy might well be a fallacy, that of everyone to his own taste, but for the likes of Mr Sherwin its freedom was far from spurious.

Collins’ idea of modern luxury, as he stated in *The Evil Genius* (1886), meant a “perfection which implies restraint within the limits of good taste” (88). Nothing could be more opposite than suburbia as depicted in *Basil*. Collins cleverly spotted the conundrum faced by mid-nineteenth century society: how to deal with a commercial environment where, under an ongoing project of aesthetic democratisation, an impressive range of cheap commodities directed to “the great middle class of our British population” (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 16) were being made available by new methods of mass production. The glare that almost blinded Basil when entering the living room of the suburban villa was a sign of things to come, a lustre inherent to industrial commodities thoroughly devoid of that unique appearance of a distance that characterises Walter Benjamin’s aura. As John Store Smith noted in his book *Social Aspects* (1851), trifles like carpets and hangings, once seen with wonderment, could now be spotted in any middle-class abode of the capital—to the extent that most of London tradesmen owned “a better stock of family plate and linen than many a country squire, even of the last generation” (qtd. in Briggs, *Victorian Cities* 20). Had Smith directed his steps to the new villas encroaching upon London, he would have thought twice before praising the quality of the stock. George R. Porter offered a similar view in *The Progress of a Nation* (1851) when pointing out the emergence of a prosperous middle-class household confident enough to cultivate

“one or more of those elegant accomplishments which tend so delightfully to enlighten the minds of individuals and sweeten the intercourse of families” (qtd. in Briggs, *Victorian Cities* 20). Of course, what Porter deemed as “elegant accomplishments” meant for the inhabitants of the outskirts of the capital a display of coarse taste painful to look at. As the mid-century progressed, new traditions were being created overnight, tramping over old ones with centuries of antiquity. Even John Bright, probably the most important radical figure of the mid-century, understood the extraordinary changes transforming the social body of the country. Speaking at Manchester in 1849 concerning the repeal of the Corn Laws, Bright saw a bright future ahead:

The anti-Corn Law League will henceforth stand before the world as a sign of a new order of things. Until now, this country has been ruled by the class of great proprietors of the soil. Every one [*sic*] must have foreseen that, as trade and manufacturers extended, the balance of power would, at times or other, be thrown into another scale. Well, that time has come, and the rising of the League ... was sufficient to have pointed out to any statesman that the power of the landed aristocracy had reached its height and that henceforth it would find a rival to which eventually it must become subjected. We have been living through a revolution without knowing it. (qtd. in Briggs, *Victorian People* 208)

Bright’s analysis, not matter how biased it was regarding the importance of the Corn League, was accurate enough when dealing with the shifting of the balance of power in mid-century England. A new class, empowered by an incredible surge of wealth, posited a serious threat for the proprietors of the soil. Even those who did not rise spectacularly in the social ladder, like Mr Sherwin in *Basil*, had reasons enough to feel confident about when voicing their own aesthetic opinions upon their (allegedly) social superiors. Truly, the country had lived through a deep transformation without knowing it. This was a time, the mid-century, when, as Collins noticed, “rents and premises were adapted, in a steeply descending scale, to the means of the middle classes with large incomes, of the middle classes with moderate incomes, and of the middle classes with small incomes” (*Hide and Seek* 16). The middle class moved centre stage and the consumption of art suffered accordingly. No longer a subject of delectation limited to

the happy few, art appreciation became increasingly democratised: as rent and premises were adapted to the means of the middle class so it was the ownership of beautiful objects. And in that process of adaptation essential qualities of highbrow taste were inevitably lost resulting in the oppressive environment of the suburban villa—that “neutral ground of the moderate incomes” which, according to Collins, turns out to be “the dullest, the dreariest, the most oppressively conventional division of the whole suburb” (*Hide and Seek* 18). As the century advanced, and as the middle class asserted itself as a force to be reckoned with, the outdoors of the capital, once meant to be a place of refuge against the degradation of the most central neighbourhoods, slowly turned into places to avoid. There is little, if nothing, of pleasing and picturesque in the landscape encircling London as is described by Collins.⁹⁹ On the contrary, suburbia is “that sort of place where the thoughtful man looking about him mournfully at the locality, and physiologically observing the inhabitants” would stop for a second and ask himself “Do these people ever manage to get any real enjoyment out of their lives, from one year’s end to another?” (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 18). They did, actually. Some people managed to get some enjoyment through the display of cheap commodities devoid of any real aesthetic value: “To the looker-on at the system of life prevailing among the moderate incomes in England, the sort of existence which that system embodies seems in some aspects without a parallel in any other part of the civilised world” (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 18). Indeed it was—at least for a while. Collins saw the spread of suburbia not at all as a random fact but as the natural expression of a new commercial system that favoured uniformity and conformism, an oppressive environment from which he recoiled in earnest. Suburbia confirmed the shift in the balance of power noticed by John Store Bright. Truly it had been thrown into another scale. How dangerous were the people inhabiting the outskirts of London and other growing cities for the still prevailing rule of taste, and what measures were carried out to keep them at bay, were questions that Collins addressed years later in *The Woman in White* (1859-1860). But for the moment his story of modern life merely reflected the burgeoning democratisation of taste encircling the capital in a time when the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic was at its peak and the effects of the Great Exhibition still lingered on the air. Truly, *Basil* was “in great part a *product*

⁹⁹ Promotions of “detached villas of pleasing and picturesque appearance” destined to become “the seats of families of distinction” (qtd. in Briggs, *Victorian Cities* 28) were regular by this time.

of the nascent movement toward modern life in the visual arts from the late 1840s onward” (Dolin and Dougan 6). Collins’ first serious attempt in the field of literature would not have been possible before the mid-century and the very particular urban environment of the British metropolis. The 1850s were meant to be quite a different decade from the previous one in what aesthetic appreciation concerned. Collins’ interest in the pivotal changes affecting the art world were further explored in *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *A Rogue’s Life* (1856) as the next chapter shows.

3 A CHANGING ARTISTIC LANDSCAPE: *HIDE AND SEEK* (1854) AND *A ROGUE'S LIFE* (1856)

In 1853, roughly at the same time of Holman Hunt's long delayed departure for the Middle East, Millais became associate member of the Royal Academy. His election proved momentous for the future of Pre-Raphaelitism: Dante Gabriel Rossetti thought of it as a surrender to the art establishment, Millais having rejected the core principles upon which the art movement had been built.¹⁰⁰ Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the art movement that Collins knew from its early inception came to an end in 1853. Even Millais' son was forced to concede on this point when writing how by this time "the Brotherhood itself no longer existed in its old form as a body of associated workers" (Millais 223).¹⁰¹ It was a plain truth not obvious to everyone. Reading Ruskin's reviews of the annual exhibitions held at the Royal Academy, one could think that Pre-Raphaelitism never vanished. Attending the 1856 showcase at Trafalgar Square, Ruskin found difficult to distinguish a Pre-Raphaelite painting "as a separate class" since "between them and the comparatively few pictures remaining quite of the old school, there is a perfectly unbroken gradation, formed by the works of painters in various stages of progress, struggling forward out of their conventionalism to the Pre-Raphaelite standard" (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 207)—that is, the depiction of Nature so cherished by the brethren. Following Ruskin's account, the once marginal approach to painting had become in a brief span of time the new standard to imitate. The annual exhibition of 1856 was the definite proof of the success of Pre-Raphaelitism. It was crystal clear when looking at the pictures that "animosity has changed into emulation, astonishment into sym-

¹⁰⁰ Although how committed Rossetti was to these very same principles is, to say the least, debatable. Reading contemporary accounts, what came after the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood bore little resemblance with it: "They belong to an entirely different school", wrote John Guilles Millais of Rossetti's most famous paintings, "which he himself founded, and which has since had such able exponents as Mr Strudwick and Sir Edward Burne Jones" (qtd. in Millais 61). Rossetti, John Guilles Millais argues, "was never a Pre-Raphaelite at heart" (58). According to John Guilles Millais, Millais' son, his father accepted to become Associate of the Royal Academy precisely for the sake of the movement: "Having taken upon himself the championship of Pre-Raphaelite principles, he was determined to make the Academy acknowledge his power as the chief, if not the only, exponent of their principles" (Millais 216). Becoming part of the "recognised authority" was an inevitable step to take in order to keep Pre-Raphaelitism alive—a task arguably all the more pressing after the arrival of Frederic Leighton in 1855, soon to become an art favourite of the academy clique.

¹⁰¹ Holman Hunt, writing to Millais in 1855, was quite blunt: "I wonder how you all go on in London. No Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood meetings, of course. The thing was a solemn mockery two or three years past, and died of itself" (qtd. in Millais 237).

pathy, and a true and consistent school of art is at last established in the Royal Academy of England” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 207). Contrary to past practice, artists were now painting from Nature ignorant of forlorn art conventions. Gone was the outrage of conservative criticism when assessing the first Pre-Raphaelite paintings presented to the public. Eventually, as Ruskin was eager to point out, the art world got it right. Millais’ *Peace Concluded, 1856* and *Autumn Leaves* were two masterpieces of indisputable quality: they adhered to the best Pre-Raphaelite tradition of painting in accordance with Nature. The movement, Ruskin wrote, had prevailed “sweeping away in its strong current many of the opposers themselves, whirling them hither and thither, for the moment, in its eddies, without giving them time to strike out” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 275). But things changed dramatically in 1857.

Reviewing the annual exhibition of that year, it was clear to Ruskin that something had gone awfully wrong: “The change in his manner”, he wrote apropos of Millais’ *A Dream of the Past*, “from the years of ‘Ophelia’ and ‘Mariana’ to 1857, is not merely a Fall—it is a Catastrophe; not merely a loss of power, but a reversal of principle: his excellence has been effaced, ‘as a man wipeth a dish—wiping it, and turning upside down’” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Painting* 247). The picture was simply a disaster according to Ruskin, badly painted and oddly executed. Such was the direction taken by Millais that the adversaries of the brotherhood had reasons enough to celebrate: the paintings exhibited were the confirmation of the brethren’s preference for ugliness instead of beauty. In an ironical twist, the old complaints about the Pre-Raphaelite style of painting were eventually endorsed by one who had been a staunch supporter of the movement.¹⁰² Millais, once the best embodiment of Pre-Raphaelite technique, had drifted away from the example set by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century artists to catastrophic results. The movement, Ruskin concluded, was over, but not without attaining a victory of sorts. As any attentive observer could attest, the Pre-Raphaelite style had eventually succeeded since the paintings on display “which before were unnoticed in the midst of others as wrong, are now unnoticed in the midst of others as right; and that they have become

¹⁰² Following Ruskin’s analysis, there was in *A Dream of the Past* a “dwelling perpetually upon the harshest lines of form, and most painful conditions of expression, both in human feature and in natural objects which long ago, when they appeared in Millais’ picture of the ‘Carpenter’s Shop,’ restrained the advance of Pre-Raphaelitism” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 249).

no more conspicuous in reformation than they were in heresy” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 276). The once provocative character of the movement was, if not embraced, at least tolerated: “The old art of trick and tradition”, Ruskin further elaborated, “had no language but for the connoisseur” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 276). Eventually, an aesthetic on the fringes of artistic respectability had gained recognition. Maybe once upon a time, Ruskin argued, “people were forced to draw by rule, and were never allowed either to think or feel” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 276). But such was no longer the case. The simple fact of “the more experienced masters” being labelled as “Academic or pre-Raphaelite” (Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 311) evinced the extent of change. Dickens’ “Old Lamps for New Ones”, published barely a few years before, belonged to a completely different time. The art once condemned as heretical was now deemed worthy of praise. Collins, to his credit, had a perfect understanding of the steps that led to the mid-century revolution in painting.

3.1 OLD MASTERS AND NEW PATRONS

Collins’ *Hide and Seek* (1854), published by Richard Bentley following the customary three-volume edition, revolves around the tribulations of Mary, a deaf and dumb child adopted by Valentine Blyth, an artist, and Lavinia, his invalid wife. Blyth, an idle fellow “who knew that his father’s liberality placed him beyond the necessity of working for his bread, and who had taken the pursuing of painting as a mere amateur amusement to occupy his leisure hours” (*Hide and Seek* 21), rescued the child from a travelling circus where she lost her hearing in an accident. Mary’s dying mother had been helped by the wife of a circus clown, the benevolent Mrs Peckover, who raised the child as her own. Mary’s only clue to her original identity is a hair-bracelet with the initials MG kept locked by Blyth in his bureau afraid as he was that one day her family may reappear. The young Zachary Thorpe (Zack) is a frequent visitor to Blyth’s studio despite his father’s disapproval of Mary’s past. Mary falls in love with him, yet Zack does not realise it and keeps to himself enjoying the pleasures offered by the capital. Being involved in a fight during one of his nights out, he is rescued by Mat Marksman, a wanderer with a physical peculiarity: when in America he has been scalped by

Indians. Eventually, Zack leaves his father's house and moves with his new-found friend. Mat, looking for his lost sister, visits his aunt, old Joanna Grice, and learns about the family scandal which happened after he went abroad. His sister, Mary, left home, pregnant with an illegitimate child, only to die and be buried in a pauper's grave. Mat takes with him a box containing Mary's old love letters as well as a note from his aunt Grice explaining Mary's conduct. Reading the letters, Mat finds out Arthur Carr to be his sister's lover. Carr's letters had been taken by Mrs Grice and Mary, thinking herself deserted, left home to avoid disgracing the family. She never knew that her father had forgiven her. Back in London, Mat accompanies Zack to Blyth's studio. Struck by the resemblance between Madonna and his dead sister, a comment by Zack makes Mat realise that the clue to the girl's origin is locked in Blyth's bureau. After getting Blyth drunk, Mat takes an impression of his key and obtains the bracelet. Mat, recognising that the brown hair in the bracelet is identical with that of Zack, guesses his father to be Arthur Carr and confronts him. Zack's father confesses in a letter to Blyth, while Mat destroys a similar note to Zack and takes the boy with him to America. After hearing of Zack's father's death, Mat reveals the whole secret, including the fact that Zack and Madonna are brother and sister. Zack, on returning home, eventually persuades Mat to leave his errant life and rejoin his niece in England.

Collins, setting the plot of his novel in the decades previous to the mid-century, depicted a society where class boundaries proved remarkably fragile. Mr Blyth's studio is the meeting point for a "heterogeneous congregation of worshippers at the shrine of art, who were some of them of small importance, some of doubtful importance, some of no importance at all" (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 185). Indeed, these worshippers represented "almost every variety of rank in the social scale" ranging from "the aristocracy of race" impersonated "by his one noble patron, the Dowager Countess of Brambledown" to "the aristocracy of art by two or three Royal Academicians; and the aristocracy of money [represented] by eight or ten highly respectable families, who came quite as much to look at the Dowager Countess as to look at the pictures" (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 185). The fact of the aristocracy of race being outnumbered by the aristocracy of money reflects the extent of social change sweeping the country. A growing class of (allegedly) respectable families anxious to assert their newly gained position through the acquisition of works of art was quite a novelty at the time. And not a very

welcomed one by those who traditionally had the only say in matters of art. In Collins' *Basil*, set a few decades after the plot of *Hide and Seek*, the father of the eponymous protagonist recoils in earnest from those who have benefited from the increase in wealth prompted by the quick pace of industrial development: "This money-lending tradesman, your 'friend!'", exclaims the old esquire. "If I had heard that the poorest labourer on my land called you 'friend,' I should have held you honoured by the attachment and gratitude of an honest man. When I hear the name given to you by a tradesman and money-lender, I hold you contaminated by connection with a cheat" (159). To Basil's father, a member of the landed gentry through and through, any connection with trade betrayed a fondness for greed and luxury more proper to urban centres of commerce than the countryside. Old money, the argument followed, was untainted by debauchery and corruption—and all the more valuable for that. However, the money-lending tradesmen proved to be truly a force to be reckoned with as the years went by. The time for the gentlemen of ancient lineage to rule over the art world was quickly coming to an end. Collins was perfectly aware of how much of his fortune was indebted to them since his father's career as a professional painter had been built on the support of the aristocracy of race. To a point, certainly. In 1848, writing to Robert Peel, former Prime Minister and founder of the Conservative Party, upon the forthcoming publication of the *Memoirs of William Collins* (1849), Collins quite explicitly praised Peel's past patronage of his deceased father in the most laudatory terms. Peel, son of a wealthy manufacturer, belonged to the same aristocracy of money that attended Mr Blyth's studio. Even artists like William Collins traditionally dependent upon the patronage of the aristocracy of race could not avoid dealing with this new class of affluent patrons as time went by. In Altick's words, it was rather "an unmistakable fact that the Captain of Industry and the Merchant Prince has succeeded the eighteenth century Man of Taste as the decisive arbiters of English Art" (qtd. in Gilmore 26). Little Collins' father knew how his youngest child and friends were to benefit from a thoroughly different understanding of the patronage system when launching their attack on the English School of painting.

Hide and Seek meant a sort of reconciliation between Collins and the critics. As Geraldine Jewsbury pointed out in her unsigned review for *The Athenaeum*, with his new novel Collins

“has ceased walking the moral hospital to which he has hitherto confined his excursions” (qtd. in Page 55). There was not a hint of the exaggeration and false sentiment characteristic of Collins’ previous works. The improvement of his craftsmanship was undeniable, especially in the delineation of his characters, some of them looking “like a study from real life” (qtd. in Page 56). *Hide and Seek* was, in short, “a work which every one should read” (qtd. in Page 56). The anonymous reviewer of *The Spectator* was of similar opinion, praising the novel for being an improvement upon *Basil*: “There is less office in the main drift of the story; the characters have more vigour, variety and purpose; and though it cannot be said that the book is very natural, it is not so unnatural as its immediate predecessor” (qtd. in Page 54). Interestingly, a point of contention for the reviewer was Collins’ approach to his characters. Letting the common to predominate, scenes and persons were tainted by “a species of lowness or vulgarity” (qtd. in Page 55). Certainly, all representation in art was conditioned by the artist’s viewpoint, but, as the reviewer pointed out, some artists were capable of holding “their mastery over the nature they are about to depict, sympathise with it, retaining the higher qualities, but rejecting or subduing what is common” (qtd. in Page 55)—in other words, they were skilful enough to apply an idealisation of beauty *à la Reynolds*.¹⁰³ But that was not the case with the author of *Hide and Seek*: “Mr Collins too often lets the common predominate” (qtd. in Page 55). However, provided that Collins stuck to historical fiction as he did with his first novel, a brilliant future awaited him since the nature of the genre was to work in his favour: “No one in an historical subject selects low or common life for a theme” (qtd. in Page 54). Reservations aside, *Hide and Seek* was an improvement upon *Basil* according to *The Spectator*. Collins’ avoidance of issues that could revolt Mrs Grundy’s prudish morals eventually paid off. Luckily, he was to struck the same note again with *A Rogue’s Life* (1856).

Just when Ruskin was praising the triumph of Pre-Raphaelitism in his 1856 review, Collins turned his attention to the “old art of trick and tradition” in *A Rogues’ Life: Written by Himself* (1856). In Collins’ novella, serialised in weekly instalments through the month of March in

¹⁰³ Interestingly, an unsigned review in *The Leader* thought of character development as the weakest part of *Hide and Seek* due to Collins substitution of “portrait-painting for development” (qtd. in Page 56).

Dickens' *Household Words*, Frank Softly, a poor young gentleman who has tried a variety of professions to no avail, including the forging of Old Masters, falls in love with Alicia, the daughter of a counterfeit coin maker called Dr Dulcifer whose gang he joins. After eloping with Alicia to Scotland and marrying her, Frank is arrested, tried and transported to Australia where his speculations proved successful enough to turn him into a rich man. Heavily indebted to the popular literary genre of rogue novels that stretches back to the sixteenth century, Collins' *A Rogues' Life* deals quite extensively with the art world of the Regency era, an environment well known to the author as son of a famous landscape painter.¹⁰⁴ There was a time, Collins' narrator recollected, when any artist rejected "by the Royal Academy, and neglected by the patrons of Art" (*A Rogues' Life* 39) because of the novelty of his approach to painting was doomed to a life of poverty, excluded as he was from a very limited art market. Before the mid-century, the purchasers of pictures "never presumed to think for themselves" since they "either inherited or bought a gallery more or less full of old pictures" and put "their faith in these on hearsay evidence, as to put their faith in King, Lords and Commons" (Collins, *A Rogue's Life* 43). Little could be done to fight the force of convention. Amongst certain art buyers, "[i]t was an article of their creed to believe that the dead painters were the great men, and that the more the living painters imitated the dead, the better was their chance of becoming at some future day, and in a minor degree, great also" (Collins, *A Rogue's Life* 44). Strict adherence to the style of painting of the Old Masters curtailed any attempt of innovation. For those unwilling to submit to the dictates of art orthodoxy, the path ahead was far from smooth:

His work [of the modern artist] was hung up in any out-of-the-way corner of the gallery that could be found; it had been bought under protest; it was admitted by sufferance; its freshness and brightness damaged it terribly by contrast with the dirtiness and the dinginess of its elderly predecessors; and its only points selected for praise were those in which it most nearly resembled the peculiar mannerism of some Old Master, not those in which it resembled the characteristics of the old mistress—Nature. (Collins, *A Rogue's Life* 44)

¹⁰⁴ The novella was only published in book form by Richard Bentley in 1879 with no half-title. An American edition was also published that same year. The edition used in this dissertation follows the one by Bentley.

As matters stood, only adhering to tradition could the modern artist get the recognition he craved for. Collins' cunning understanding of the art market echoed that of S. C. Hall, editor of the *Art Journal*: "There was literally no 'patronage' for British Art", Hall wrote of the immediate years previous to the mid-century. "Collectors—wealthy merchants and manufacturers—did indeed buy pictures as befitting household ornaments, but they were 'old masters' with familiar names; canvases that had never been seen by the artists to whom they were attributed; copies or imitations by 'prentice hands', that were made to seem *old*" (343).¹⁰⁵ The market of forgeries was so extended that even Collins' rogue earned his living for a while in this trade. In fact, the practice was common enough for the *Art Journal* to denounce in 1856 an upcoming auction of Old Masters' paintings at Birmingham for being a selling point of falsifications. The polemic that ensued—the art dealer responsible brought an action for libel that ended in a verdict for the plaintiff of forty shillings—proved a boost to Hall's ego, claiming for himself a radical change in the attitude of merchants and manufacturers alike towards modern art. Those "who were bent on adorning their mansions with paintings, thus warned, would purchase no more Raphaels and Titians; they bought modern pictures instead" (Hall 352). Actually, they were doing so for quite a while. When serialisation of Collins' *A Rogue's Life* started in the pages of *Household Words*, roughly at the very same time of Hall's take on the market of forgeries, the work of the modern artist had already left the out-of-the-way corner of the gallery to be hung in the mansions of wealthy industrialists.¹⁰⁶ As I mentioned before when dealing with *Basil* (1852), the freshness and brightness of modern painting noticed by Collins in the above passage was a common complaint of conservative criticism against

¹⁰⁵ The neglect of British Art had been already noted by James Northcote in 1807 when writing about the "melancholy spectacle ... offered to Englishmen, to view the pining arts of Britain beset and trampled by an army of connoisseurs and collectors of foreign pictures, strengthened by the most powerful assistance of dealers in this species of traffic" (qtd. in Minihan 1).

¹⁰⁶ "So long as noblemen were the sole patrons of Art, and picture-dealers their principal advisers in forming galleries, old masters usurped the field, almost to the exclusion of contemporary painters. The patron, in nine cases out of ten, was unable to distinguish a genuine Raphael from a tolerable copy, and the picture-dealers found a mine of wealth in this ignorance. While they were able to sell copies at the prices of originals, it was not to be expected that they would urge their employers to the purchase of modern works, in which no such deception was possible. The living painter was sure, sooner or later, either to oust the dealer altogether, or, at least, to reduce his profits to something like the fair remuneration of mere agency. Thus pitted against the ancient masters, with only ignorant patrons to appeal to from dishonest dealers, the English painter had his choice of two alternatives. He might represent nature as he saw her, and starve; or he might paint her through the spectacles of the old masters who happened to be in fashion, and then he had a chance of subsistence—though a bare one" (*A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings* 12-13). Allegedly, the Pre-Raphaelites were lucky to avoid starvation.

the Pre-Raphaelites whose canvasses lacked the obscurity and dinginess that characterised Old Masters' paintings. Indeed, the buying of modern pictures by those with money enough in their pockets effected a revolution in the art market. The modern artist was lucky enough to have a new breed of patrons unconcerned with tradition and keen to think for themselves. He was also lucky to have the complicity of the Royal Academy in his fight against stultifying convention.

What Collins addressed as the "evident intention [by Millais and Holman Hunt] of not appealing to any popular predilections on the subject of grace or beauty" ("The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 623) clearly found supporters amongst the Hanging Committee, no matter how loud were the protestations of the guardians of art orthodoxy. Collins, son of a royal academician "famous as a painter of English life and English scenery" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 206), was well acquainted with the aesthetic questioned by his Pre-Raphaelite friends. His father, William Collins, had developed his professional career in a world that praised tradition, not innovation: "For one nobleman who was ready to buy one genuine modern picture at a small price", Collins *filis* wrote in *A Rogue's Life*, "there were twenty noblemen ready to buy twenty more than doubtful old pictures at great prices" (45). Collins, to his credit, showed a remarkable knowledge of how these collectors behaved: "Give them a picture with a good large ruin, fancy tress, prancing nymphs, and a watery sky", suggests the fictional voice of *A Rogue's Life*, "dirty it down dexterously to the right pitch; put it in an old frame; call it a Claude; and the sphere of the Old-Master is enlarged, the collector is delighted, the picture-dealer is enriched, and the neglected modern artist claps a joyful hand on a well-filled pocket" (41). Writing from the secure vantage point of the mid-century, Collins could confidently cast a backward glance upon an art market that had been greatly affected by the tide of wealth sprouting from capitalist development. Both Collins and his brother were brought up in a world where only those artists who submitted to the mannerisms of the Old Masters had a chance of success—if any chance at all.¹⁰⁷ There was a time when "nobody be-

¹⁰⁷ Collins' successful maternal aunt, the painter Margaret Carpenter, is a case in point. Carpenter exhibited 147 paintings between 1818 and 1866 at the Royal Academy and such was her fame that some academicians thought of changing the rules of the institution in order to admit her. Carpenter's career was indebted to the system of patronage: her first patrons, Lord and Lady Radnor, funded her studies in London (Peters 16). Another maternal aunt, Catherine Gray, was an accomplished portrait painter who exhibited *Portrait of Two Sisters* at the Royal Academy in 1844.

neath the nobleman, or the gentleman of ancient lineage, so much as thought of buying a modern picture ... nobody dared to whisper that the Art of painting had in anyway been improved or worthily enlarged in its sphere by any modern professors” (Collins, *A Rogue’s Life* 44-45). Indeed there had been such a time. But, as the commodification of the arts increased, those who refused to accommodate to the prevailing conventions in matters of taste found opportunities previously undreamed of. Fancy trees and prancing nymphs exerted no appeal whatsoever for the new kind of collector that emerged in the mid-century. Actually, they recoiled in earnest from popular predilections on the subject of grace or beauty.

3.2 MERCHANT PRINCES

As the 1850s progressed, the rejection of tradition in search of a new artistic language more suitable to the times still managed to provoke the chagrin of conservative reviewers: “What are things coming to?”, wondered Robert Atkinson in *Blackwood’s Magazine* shocked by the generous appraisal of Pre-Raphaelitism given in the pages of *The Times* by the critic Tom Taylor. “Certain artists and critics seem tacitly to have conspired in order to defraud our national art of her grandeur and dignity” (qtd. in Prettejohn 75). To Atkinson’s astonishment, criticism was rallying in favour of the movement when only a few years before its practitioners were the subject of the heaviest scorn in the pages of the conservative newspaper. He should not have been surprised though. Dickens’ rambunctious take on Millais’ *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) belonged to the past. To complain about the lost grandeur and dignity of English art did little sense when the mid-century was drawing to a close. Ruskin, perhaps the man who laboured the most to enhance the reputation of the Pre-Raphaelites, knew better: “As year by year in the Royal Academy, the principles established by the Pre-Raphaelites are more frankly accepted, and more patiently put in practice” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 235). The institution at Trafalgar Square was after all one of these “agencies of consecration” pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu “whose selective operations are invested with a truly cultural legitimacy even if they are subordinated to economic and social

constraints” (112).¹⁰⁸ Atkinson failed to notice, as those behind the Hanging Committee of the Royal Academy did, that the “grandeur and simplicity” of national art was increasingly alien to a new public empowered by capitalist development. A different language was required to deal with the complexities of daily life in the mid-century, a time of profound social, political and economic change. It was a plain truth that Collins made evident when casting his glance backwards to an epoch when modern pictures were disregarded as a mere folly, with painters, the “martyrs of the brush”, standing “palette in hand, fighting the old battle of individual merit against contemporary dullness” (*A Rogues’ Life* 45). Theirs was indeed a story of resilience, “fighting bravely, patiently, independently” against a system that relied on “the feebly-buttoned pocket of the patron and the inexhaustible credulity of the connoisseur” (Collins, *A Rogues’ Life* 45). But things were to change dramatically when to the aristocracies of race and art was added that of money.¹⁰⁹

The growth of the middle class and specifically of the so-called merchant princes hinted by F. G. Stephens turned upside down the structure of the social body of the country. As an anonymous contributor for *The Cornhill Magazine* wrote: “It is no wonder if there is confusion and haziness in our discussions if we are all talking of different sorts of people under the same name” (“Middle-Class Education in England” 411).¹¹⁰ Regardless of that confusion—barely surprising when bearing in mind the quick pace of social change sweeping the country—there is no doubt of the upheaval experienced by the art market of mid-century England due to capitalist development. The creed that had curtailed innovation in painting for so long began to

¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu writes of a “hierarchy of relations” which “expresses the structure of objective relations of symbolic force between the producers of symbolic goods who produce for either a restricted or unrestricted public and are consequently consecrated by differentially legitimised and legitimising institutions” (121). Institutions such as academies “by their symbolic sanctions ... consecrate a certain type of work and a certain type of cultivated person” (121).

¹⁰⁹ “As relish for art has spread within culture the middle class has increased in numbers and in wealth, and the painter has at length come to look to them as his truest patrons” (*A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition* 14).

¹¹⁰ Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1838) redefined what was understood by middle class. When that book came out “a sensible man made the useful remark that the most striking thing about the book was that it disclosed to the rest of the world an unsuspected gradation of ranks in that great mass which is commonly spoken of as the lower orders ... Till we read *Oliver Twist*, some of us were too like the grand folks who confound all below themselves under one denomination” (“Middle-Class Education in England” 411).

crumble when dissident voices found supporters for their views: “The majority of the English aristocracy have no care for their country’s art”, Collins told Holman Hunt in 1852. “The works of the old Masters, done for the satisfaction of the Church centuries ago, which some of them collected, might all have been bought for English collections without advancing native art one whit. The men who really opened the way for you painters were the manufacturers when finding themselves rich enough to indulge in the refinements of life” (qtd. in Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 224). Indeed, these manufacturers were the real force behind the progress of English painting. And Holman Hunt, a direct beneficiary of this pivotal change in the consumption of art, thoroughly agreed with Collins’ analysis: “We want works that will be within our own intelligence and that are akin to our own interests”, some of these manufacturers had said. “Jupiter, Venus, and Minerva, and such gentlemen and ladies may be proper in ancient houses, and the pictures of the Virgin and Child, as also subjects of apocryphal tradition, are strictly on the vogue, but we want living ideas within our own comprehension and on the walls of our homes, landscapes familiar to us, and illustrations of a literature breathing national sentiment” (qtd. in Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 224). A new kind of aristocracy, that of money, demanded an aesthetic suitable to their social status. If the likes of Turner, Holman Hunt, or Rossetti had a career in painting at all it was mainly due to the interest of a few rich men bold enough to dismiss inherited opinion. It was a plain truth obvious to Millais, who already in 1851, in the midst “of the present panic” against the Pre-Raphaelites, wrote how “putting aside the good work of purchasing from those who require encouragement, such patrons will be respected afterwards as wise and useful men amongst knavish fools, who should be destroyed in their revolting attempts to crush us—attempts so obviously malicious as to prove our rapid ascendancy” (qtd. in Millais 102). Millais was thoroughly right: were not for these patrons, the fortunes of Pre-Raphaelitism would have been quite different. Modern painting in England developed because a few men, bereft of an aesthetic that they could claim as their own, dared to trust their own judgment in matters of art and instrumental role as patrons.

The attachment to Old Masters by those inhabiting ancient houses exerted little appeal amongst the rich merchants that benefited from the spread of industrialism on English soil. Never for a moment Basil's family, landowners responsible for the maintenance of a system that did not allow dissident voices to flourish, thought to follow the example set by wise and useful men. To the latter belonged "the appreciations that founded English art, and they showed their good common-sense", Collins further elaborated to Holman Hunt. "You artists and the whole country owe them a debt of gratitude for having done it, and given English painters something better to do than in doctoring old Masters suffering from decay" (qtd. in Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 225). The patronage of the thousands might well support men devoted to the pen, but the likes of Holman Hunt were dependent on the common-sense of the few and lucky indeed to find willing men amongst knavish fools. Collins' *A Rogue's Life*—"an attack on British taste in the early nineteenth century" (Peters 162)—can be read, I think, as an account of the developments that led to that "heterogeneous congregation of worshippers at the shrine of art" depicted in it. To the "rough and ready customers ... not to be led by rules or frightened by precedents" (Collins, *A Rogue's Life* 46) must be credited the mid-century revolution in the consumption of art. The new approach to painting proposed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood would not have been possible without them: "Sturdily holding to their own opinions", the narrator of *A Rogue's Life* tells about the aforementioned customers,

they thought the incessant repetitions of Saints, Martyrs, and Holy Families monotonous and uninteresting—and said so. They saw that trees were green in nature, and brown in the Old Masters, and they thought the latter colour not an improvement on the former—and said so. They wanted interesting subjects; variety, resemblance to nature, genuineness of the article, and fresh paint; they had no ancestors whose feelings, as founders of galleries, it was necessary to consult ... nothing to lead them by the nose but their own shrewdness, their own interests, and their own tastes—so they turned their backs valiantly on the Old Masters, and marched off in a body to the living men. (46-47)

And, when doing so, they dismissed the kind of aesthetic patronised by Sir Joshua Reynolds and being taught at the Royal Academy. Changing "they" by "the Pre-Raphaelites", the above

quotation reads as an account of the emergence of the Brotherhood as a socially recognised art movement. All the qualities that the rough and ready customers searched for—variety of subject, resemblance to nature, fresh colours—guided the practice of the brethren who clearly benefited from a new environment favourable to their experimentations. Had they tried their new aesthetic a decade before, the outcome would have been quite different. Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), as I mentioned in the preceding chapter, was commissioned by the wealthy industrialist Thomas Fairbairn who showed an extraordinary independence of criteria when purchasing a painting widely considered to be mere filth by the self-appointed masters of taste. Fairbairn's courage in the face of adversity was shared by those who supported Millais and Charles Collins with the purchase of their paintings. And it was a support all the more remarkable bearing in mind the backlash faced by the artists: "You must also be aware that this heresy has been opposed with all the influence and all the bitterness of art and criticism", wrote Ruskin in his 1854 lecture upon Pre-Raphaelitism, "but that in spite of these the heresy has gained ground, and the pictures painted on these new principles have obtained a most extensive popularity" (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 151). That popularity, Ruskin forgot to mention, was indebted to these wealthy newcomers able to sustain a new kind of aesthetic thoroughly opposed to the prevailing standard of pictorial beauty and therefore easy to appropriate for their own benefit. Collins' manufacturers were bold enough to question what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*—that set of interiorised dispositions from which perceptions and practices are derived.¹¹¹ Arguably, their desire for social aggrandisement matched the brethren's discomfort with forlorn conceptions of painting. Men like Fairbairn, endowed by a surplus of capital, decided to follow their own desires and interests and not to take into consideration what aristocrats like the founders of galleries had to say—and it was quite a lot. Credit has to be given to this new breed of art patrons brave enough to dismiss tradition and courageous to the point of defying a society that regarded suspiciously any breach of convention: "The English", as Collins' narrator noted, "are the most intolerant people in the world, in their reception of anything which presents itself to them under the form of a perfect novelty" (*Hide and Seek* 145). Collins certainly knew about intolerance. The backlash against *Basil* (1852) left him convinced of the irrational behaviour—almost border-

¹¹¹ See Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 64-72.

ing on stupidity—of his fellow nationals and it seems to reverberate in the complaints expressed by the fictional voice of *Hide and Seek*: “Let any man display a new project before the Parliament of England, or a new pair of light-green trousers before the inhabitants of London, let the project proclaim itself as useful to all listening ears, and the trousers eloquently assert themselves as beautiful to all beholding eyes, the nation will shrink suspiciously, nevertheless, both from the one and the other” and English society will immediately “order the first to ‘lie on the table’, and will hoot, laugh, and stare at the second; will, in short, resent either novelty as an unwarrantable intrusion, for no other discernible reason than that people in general are not used to it” (145-146). Those who sturdily held to their own opinions in a hostile environment, either rough and ready customers or young artists, showed courage enough to be praised. Collins, in my view, had a remarkable understanding of the changes affecting aesthetic consumption right at the very beginning of his professional career in the field of letters. With good reason Holman Hunt wrote how his friend “by family tradition had knowledge of the interest of Art for more than one past generation; thus he spoke with the more experience on the matter” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 225).¹¹² Indeed, Collins’ experience has not always been given its due.

Both Collins’ *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *A Rogue’s Life* (1856) provide a remarkable glimpse into the extraordinary changes affecting the art world during the mid-century. The Great Exhibition of 1851, with its impressive display of commodities, ran parallel to the hanging of Millais’ *The Return of the Dove to the Ark* and Charles Collins’ *Convent Thoughts* at the Royal Academy in Trafalgar Square. Visitors to the Crystal Palace erected at Hyde Park had also the chance of looking at the new Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic that prompted Dickens’ notorious outburst in the pages of *Household Words* a year before. The publication of Collins’ *Basil* (1852) further confirmed the changing social and cultural landscape of the mid-century. For

¹¹² If Holman Hunt’s memory is to be trusted, Collins’ remarks happened by the time of publication of *Basil* (1852). One year later, when travelling with Collins and Augustus Egg through Italy, Dickens wrote how “[t]he Fine Arts afford a subject which I never approach; always appearing to fall into a profound Reverie when it is discussed. Neither do I ever go into any Gallery with them. To hear Collins learnedly holding forth to Egg (who has little of that gammon as an artist *can* have) about reds, and greens, and things ‘coming well’ with other things, and lines being wrong, and lines being right, is far beyond the bounds of all caricature” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 7: 204).

those paying attention—as Robert Atkinson did in *Blackwood's Magazine*—it was blatantly obvious that old conventions no longer held sway. The cracks of the rule of taste were far too obvious not to be noticed, even by men comfortable secluded in ivory towers. To William Beckford, arguably the most renowned connoisseur of the first half of the century, the mere idea of a bunch of pretentious newcomers behaving as masters of taste was simply preposterous: “That poor rich man [Mr Holforth] has *nothing* in him but money”, he wrote almost one decade before the celebration of the Great Exhibition. “Nature has not endowed him with taste—and as he most resolutely chooses to be his own teacher he will never acquire *knowledge*” (qtd. in Davis, *Victorian Patrons of the Arts* 14). It was utter nonsense, Beckford argued, to expect any kind of connoisseurship from a man whose lack of education was notorious. Menial trade could provide plenty of money, but that was a far cry from granting a sound knowledge in matters of taste. Implicit in Beckford's criticism is his conviction of a clear divide between teachers and students for the better benefit of both parties. But had not such division become blurred of late, his complaints would not have made sense at all. Beckford failed to grasp the real meaning of the momentous decision taken by “poor” rich men like Mr Holforth. To reject the authority of those—presumably—endowed by Nature to teach seemed a mere foolery in the 1840s, a senseless bravado only to be met with derision. However, it was a foolery serious enough to support a new aesthetic in painting almost a decade later that enraged Dickens and conservative reviewers alike to the point of paroxysm. The steady, but unstoppable, debasement of the old patronage system under which the aesthetic of the Royal Academy had thrived was indebted to poor rich men like Mr Holforth who did not require Nature to endow them with taste. As Beckford reluctantly conceded, they could buy it. Time would prove how serious they were in their defiant attitude. The mingling of the aristocracy of race and art with the aristocracy of money that Collins depicted in *Hide and Seek* (1854) had already begun. As matters evolved, Beckford's deprecations proved of little effect. Collins' article “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) was to delve further into this new aesthetic landscape where men not endowed by nature with taste nonetheless strived to acquire it—no matter at what cost.

4 “TO THINK, OR BE THOUGHT FOR?” (1856)

Collins' *A Rogue's Life* (1856) meant an important change in the way the young writer published his fiction, his two previous novels following the established three-volume format to be distributed by the circulating library. However, Collins' novella was serialised in *Household Words* in weekly instalments throughout March 1856.¹¹³ Serialisation of fiction was hardly an unusual mode of publication by the mid-century. The immense success achieved by the monthly instalments of Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), issued by Chapman & Hall, boosted this mode of publication and soon cheap periodicals emerged in the wake of it.¹¹⁴ *Master Humphrey's Clock* (1840-41), for instance, was launched as an illustrated 3d. weekly miscellany written entirely by Dickens—though neither the serialisation of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* prevented its closure.¹¹⁵ As the century advanced, a deep divide emerged between “monthly serialisation in expensive, low-circulation formats, produced as petty commodities for the bourgeoisie by book publishers” and “weekly serialisation in cheap, high-circulation formats, produced as commodities for the masses by newspaper proprietors” (Law, “Periodicals and Syndication” 16). The cheap format proved extraordinarily successful with serials like G. W. M. Reynolds' *Mysteries of London* lasting from 1845 to 1850, hardly an extraordinary length for this kind of fiction and further proof of the spread of literacy amongst the masses.¹¹⁶ Collins' *A Rogue's Life*, as the whole of the litera-

¹¹³ It was republished in book form in 1879 after an invitation from George Bentley to join Bentley's Empire Library, a half-crown series with a mixture of fiction and non-fiction.

¹¹⁴ Laurel Brake points out the development of monthly serialisation as a direct outcome of the three-volume novel: “It is noteworthy that the establishment of the system of the high-priced three-volume novel in 1815 was shortly followed in 1817 by the creation of *Blackwood's Monthly Magazine*, which offered monthly instalments of novels, later to appear in volume form” (Brake 87). Monthly magazines “tended to be owned by established book publishers, priced at half-a-crown or more, and with sales under 10,000 even at their peak” (Law, “Periodicals and Syndication” 17).

¹¹⁵ “Traditionally, moreover, the novel was merely a book, and so it remained primarily down to 1840. Between 1830 and 1840 the reduction of the pair tax, which had been prohibitive to cheap miscellanies, gave opportunities for ventures such as *Bentley's Miscellany* ... and *Master Humphrey's Clock*” (Philips 73).

¹¹⁶ “By the mid-1850s”, writes Graham Law, “the most popular penny miscellanies were selling well over 250,000 copies, and the new radical Sunday papers cleared close to 100,000. It is not surprising that in 1843 the *Family Herald* claimed to be the first journal ever to be typeset, printed, and bound entirely by machine, and in 1855 Lloyd was the first English publisher to import the new Hoe rotary printing press from America” (“Periodicals and Syndication” 21). The *Family Herald* was a penny miscellany trying to capitalise on the success of *Bentley's Miscellany*. It appealed to a familial audience promoting a much more respectable image than the penny weeklies. Edward Lloyd was the foremost editor of penny fiction in the 1840s.

ture printed in *Household Words*, found itself in a middle ground: neither a product intended exclusively for the bourgeoisie nor a commodity written with the penny public in mind. To Dickens' magazine applied rules of its own.

Both Dickens and Collins were not strangers to each other—an early acquaintance was possibly made when the former requested a painting commission from Collins' father.¹¹⁷ Be that as it may, credit must be given to the painter August Egg for their formal meeting. Dickens was in need of amateur actors for the upcoming performance of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's play *Not So Bad As We Seem* (1851), intended to raise money for the newly created Guild of Literature and Art, an assurance society for writers and artists.¹¹⁸ Collins had some acting experience in theatricals, having performed in plays staged in the so-called "Theatre Royal Back Drawing Room" at the family abode: "I think *you* told *me*", Dickens wrote to Egg, "that Mr. Wilkie Collins would be glad to play any part in Bulwer's Comedy; and I think *I* told *you* that I considered him a very desirable recruit" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 6: 310).¹¹⁹ How the meeting went one can only wonder. Collins, on intimate terms with both Millais and Holman Hunt at the time, could not be ignorant of Dickens' public take on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In fact, Collins' review encouraging the brethren, his brother Charles included, was published in the pages of *Bentleys' Miscellany* soon after his involvement with Dickens' theatrical adventures. If the latter ardently stuck to a conception of painting inherited from the eighteenth century, Collins sided with those who decided to move forward and develop an aesthetic more suitable to the times—although certainly not without reservations. However, what started as a loose professional relationship soon grew in intimacy. Both Dickens and Collins forged an enduring friendship that lasted until the death of the former. Either traveling together to the Continent or exploring the slums of London, Dickens found a sympathetic ear in Collins, whose lack of prejudices proved quite remarkable as the years passed by. Younger than Dickens, Collins' *joie de vivre* was much needed by a man on the verge of mat-

¹¹⁷ In April 1839 Dickens commissioned from William Collins "a sea shore with figures" (Peters 95). Two years later Dickens paid £100 for *Ischia Bay of Naples*.

¹¹⁸ The Guild was formed by Bulwer-Lytton (President) and Dickens (Vice-President). For more information about the Guild, see Peters 96.

¹¹⁹ According to Pykett, Collins' debut in the professional stage happened in 1850 in *A Court Duel!* "which he adapted from a melodrama set in the French court of 1726" (*Wilkie Collins* 94).

rimonial failure and under extraordinary professional success. It was only a matter of time for Collins to join Dickens’ magazine.

4.1 ART FOR THE PEOPLE

In 1856, already a full staff member of *Household Words*, Collins published in Dickens’ magazine the unsigned article “To Think, or Be Thought For?”, intended as a response to the polemic that ensued in *The Times* between two connoisseurs about the purchasing policy carried out by the National Gallery—the real value of a painting by the Italian Bellini, recently acquired by the institution, prompted the discussion. However, what Collins found enthralling was not the resulting polemic but the fact of two people behaving as arbiters of taste. He had high hopes for the ongoing debate to awake the public mind “from its indolent and hopeless dependence on arbitrary rules and critical opinions in matters of Art” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193). As it stood, it was indeed an untenable situation:

If anything I can say here will help in the smallest degree, towards encouraging intelligent people of any rank to turn a deaf ear to everything that critics, connoisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books can say to them; to trust entirely to their own common sense when they are looking at pictures; and to express their opinions boldly, without the slightest reference to any precedents whatever, I shall have exactly achieved the object with which I now apply myself to the writing of this paper. (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193)

Bold as the statement was, Collins had nonetheless good reasons for calling the intelligent people to turn a deaf ear on criticism of any kind. Only a few years before, his Pre-Raphaelite friends had been mercilessly attacked in the conservative press for their bold defiance of artistic conventions. And the publication of *Basil* (1852) earned Collins a fair share of negative criticism in the same circles: “On its appearance”, he recollected later on, “it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety ... [but] [s]lowly and surely, my story forced its way through all adverse criticism, to a place in the public favour which it has never lost since” (*Basil* xliii). Collins’ blunt dismissal of con-

noisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” owed quite a lot, I think, to the backlash against the Pre-Raphaelites, his brother and even himself. Why, Collins wondered in his article, was the public so afraid of having an opinion of their own regarding pictures? “Setting aside, then, all further reference to particular squabbles about particular pictures”, he wrote, “let me now ask, in regard to pictures in general, what it is that prevents the public from judging for themselves, and why the influence of Art in England is still limited to select circles,—still unfelt, as the phrase is, by all but the cultivated classes?” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193). For Collins, the powerful grasp exerted by those high above in the social ladder explained the pitiful state of art appreciation amongst the general public, an intolerable situation that he aimed to question with his article. He perfectly knew that anything said in the pages of *Household Words* would serve his purposes for the simple reason of being the middle-class readership of Dickens’ magazine a fundamental part of the public mind still under the fetters of patronage. “To Think, or Be Thought For?” was to continue “the attacks of *A Rogue’s Life* on fashion driven gullibility about Old Masters” (Trodd 30-31) but placing them against a contemporary background. Collins marvelled at the control exerted by a tiny fraction of cultural snobs upon a large swath of the population: “Why do people want to look at their guide-books before they can make up their minds about an old picture?” he wondered. “Why do they ask connoisseurs and professional friends for a marked catalogue before they venture inside the walls of the exhibition-rooms in Trafalgar Square?” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193). It was a question that Collins, brought up in an artistic environment, found puzzling:

Why, when they are, for the most part, always ready to tell each other unreservedly what books they like, or what musical compositions are favourites with them, do they hesitate the moment pictures turn up as a topic of conversation, and intrench themselves doubtfully behind such cautious phrases as, ‘I don’t pretend to understand the subject,’—‘I believe such and such a picture is much admired,’—‘I am no judge,’ and so on? (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193)

Collins knew the answer beforehand: I am no judge in matters of painting, the argument followed, because there are other people more capable than me. As a reasoning, he found it completely preposterous, thoroughly indebted to the long-standing dependence of the public on arbitrary rules and critical opinions emanating from the aforementioned bunch of critics, connoisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books. To Collins’ chagrin, it was a dependence not easy to challenge. The force of convention, the blind acceptance of long established views upon art, proved to be a resilient foe: “I have long thought”, Collins wrote, “and shall always continue to believe, that this same obstacle is nothing more nor less than the Cant of Criticism, which has got obstructively between Art and the people—which has kept them asunder, and will keep them asunder, until it is fairly pulled out of the way, and set aside at once and forever in its proper background place” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194). The so-called Cant of Criticism comprised, for Collins, all “the conventional laws and formulas, the authoritative rules and regulations which individual men set up to guide the tastes and influence the opinions of their fellow-creatures” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194).¹²⁰ The mere fact of this cant still being regarded at all in the industrial and prosperous mid-century baffled Collins. Two years before, in *Hide and Seek* (1854), he had pointed out the fear of novelty as one of the worst traces of the English people. Arguably, it was precisely that very same fear that explained this anomalous situation of adherence to conventionality and hopeless dependence on the cultivated classes. Collins wished for a time when, the cant being discarded, and the authority of the happy few with it, the general public would be able to approach painting with the same carefree attitude that they showed towards literature. It never crossed Collins’ mind, however, that the very same people that trusted Mudie’s circulating library for the maintenance of their morals might not be very keen to get rid of conventional laws and formulas.

Regardless of Collins’ opinionated argument towards the Cant of Criticism, he was cautious enough to draw a subtle line between a *formal* criticism and the cant that was obstruct-

¹²⁰ There is a huge chance of the whole concept of Cant of Criticism being indebted to Dickens’ editorship: “I altered the title”, he wrote to Collins, “and it stands thus. To Think, or Be Thought For? I also changed ‘Criticism’ once or twice, to ‘Cant of Criticism’. If you should have time, I wish you would ask Wills to let you see my marked proof” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 8: 176).

ing the enjoyment of art by the people.¹²¹ A criticism that avoided arbitrariness in language and was attentive to the requirements of the “intelligent public” was a criticism well worth the attention since it stood alongside the people and not imposed opinions. The Cant of Criticism, nonetheless, measured “the greatness of intellectual work by anything rather than by its power of appealing to all capacities for admiration and enjoyment, from the very highest to the very humblest” becoming in the process mere cant that “forfeits all claim to consideration and respect” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194). This was the kind of criticism being put into practice by the connoisseurs and those self-appointed arbiters of taste who were scorned by Collins’ sharp wit. The obstructive criticism, as Collins named it, curtailed any approach of the people towards the art of painting. It was beyond dispute, he argued, that these cultured circles could not care less about the concerns of the “general heart” preoccupied as they were with the maintenance of their privileged position at the peak of the social pyramid. And that was hardly surprising. As Collins perfectly knew, the Cant of Criticism was not a product of the mid-nineteenth century. All the conventional laws and formulas, all the authoritative rules and regulations that had been imposed decade after decade by a reduced group of men did not come out of the blue. In fact, they were indebted to the teaching of a single man back in the last decades of the past century who had become the target of Collins’ Pre-Raphaelite friends: namely, Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Amongst the many speeches delivered by Sir Joshua Reynolds during the openings of the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy, the so-called Fifth Lecture deserves careful consideration. Reynolds, who by the time was president of the institution, praised in this lecture the idealisation of beauty achieved by Michael Angelo and Raphael as the guiding principle of western art.¹²² His was an endorsement of the Renaissance painters that exerted an immense influence in the development of the English School of painting until the emergence of Pre-

¹²¹ “This is a bold thing to say”, Collins wrote about the Cant of Criticism, “but I think I can advance some proofs that my assertion is not so wild as it may appear at first sight” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194).

¹²² Reynolds’ fondness for the two painters had deep roots: “If you neglect visiting the Vatican often”, he wrote in one letter dated 1769, “and particularly the Capella Sistina, you will neglect receiving that peculiar advantage which Rome can give above all other cities in the world. In other places you will find casts from the antique, and capital pictures of the great painters, but it is there only that you can form an idea of the dignity of the art, as it is there only that you can see the works of Michael Angelo and Raffael” (*Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds* 18-19).

Raphaelitism almost a century later. Collins, writing a few years after the dissolution of the brotherhood, found Reynolds’ approach to painting unendurable: “It is a great proof of the poetry and sublimity of Michael Angelo’s pictures that the people represented in them never remind us of our own species: which seems equivalent to saying that the representation of a man made in the image of Michael Angelo is a grander sight than the representation of a man made in the image of God” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 195).¹²³ The idealised depiction of reality inherited from Reynolds had been prevalent for too long. And Collins had had enough: “Sir Joshua Reynolds interposes critically, and tells us the figures on the wall and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are sublime, because they do not remind us of our own species”, he complained. “Why should they not remind us of our own species? ... Does not Sacred History inform me that the prophet was a Man, and does not Profane History describe the sibyl as an Old Woman? Is old age never venerable and striking in real life?—But I am uttering heresies. I am mutinously summoning reason and common sense to help me in estimating an Old Master” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 195).¹²⁴ So Collins’ Pre-Raphaelite friends had done not long ago. But things had changed of late. Heresies were, if not welcomed, at least tolerated when Collins’ article was published in the pages of *Household Words*. Ironically, the very same journal where Dickens had scolded Pre-Raphaelitism was now publishing a mordant critique of Reynolds’ legacy, arguably the main culprit for the brethren’s rebellion. Not that the former had experienced a sudden change of mind: “Objecting very strongly to

¹²³ Although not all of Michael Angelo’s compositions were so badly regarded. When visiting Versailles in the autumn of 1845, Collins was thunderstruck by Horace Vernet’s “The Taking of Smalah”. In his own words, “I know of no picture—except Michael Angelo’s Last Judgment—in Ancient or Modern Art, so triumphantly successful as this wonderful work” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 35). Not surprisingly, one of the most noticeable traces of Vernet’s painting was its fidelity to nature.

¹²⁴ Compare this with an excerpt from Collins’ “The Picture-Galleries of England” (1851): “Look carefully at this— it is a whole-length portrait of a lady, by Sir Joshua Reynolds—the last of the great portrait-painters—the glory of the English school. Since his time, who has painted women as *he* painted them? ... Neither let us forget to notice the attitude of the figure, so simple, so unobtrusive, so true to Nature! Here was the great superiority of the Art of Reynolds; in all his portraits he places his figures without even an appearance of exaggeration or artifice, so that neither his men, nor his women ever seem conscious that they are sitting for their likeness. Of this characteristic of the painter’s genius—and, indeed, of all other characteristics as well—the picture now before us is a magnificent example; it is worthy of the best periods and the best schools of Art” (83-84). The narrator of the article concludes with a suggestion to his companion “study [your predecessors] as Reynolds studied them; not for purposes of servile imitation, but to learn to think as *they* thought; to work genuinely and earnestly as *they* worked; to have, as the better brethren have always had, posterity before your eyes as well as self!” (352). Bearing in mind the tone of “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), and the deep relationship of Collins with the Pre-Raphaelites by 1851, the aforementioned paragraph seems to me to be intended as an ironical reflection upon Reynolds’ style of painting.

what I believe to be an unworthy use of your great powers, I once expressed the objection in this same journal”, Dickens wrote in letter addressed to Millais. “My opinion on that point is not in the least changed, but it has never dashed my admiration of your progress in what I suppose are higher and better things” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 7: 517). In 1855 when this letter was addressed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a memory of the past, Millais already an academician of the very same institution against which he had revolted. The young artist behind *Christ in the House of His Parents* was gone, as Dickens acknowledged: “In short, you have given me such great reasons (in your works) to separate you from uncongenial associations” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 7: 517). To my mind, the fact that the brethren no longer existed as a brotherhood and the close friendship between Collins and Dickens explain the publication of “To Think, or Be Thought For?” in *Household Words*. Millais’ very own evolution as a painter most probably satisfied Dickens’ conscience who adamantly refused to concede any wrong for his past opinions on the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Collins could charge against Reynolds as much as he wanted, the fate of brethren having proved the real value of “uncongenial associations”. Heresies, as time showed, were of flimsy value.

Raphael, inevitably, occupies a prominent place in Collins’ “To Think, or Be Thought For?”. The master of Urbino had been a crucial figure in the development of the English School of painting since at least the last decades of the eighteenth century, his *Transfiguration* thought to be a perfect embodiment of all the sublime characteristics that any painting should possess according to the first president of the Royal Academy. Pre-Raphaelitism, however, saw things differently.¹²⁵ The notorious imperfections to be spotted in the work of Raphael were a common subject of discussion between Millais and Holman Hunt previous to the formation of the Brotherhood. To the latter, the *Transfiguration* “still further betrayed the falsity of his methods” (Millais 49). The very name of Pre-Raphaelitism reflected a conscious rejection of the style of painting inherited from the Master of Urbino: “Now the division of

¹²⁵ According to Holman Hunt’s late recollections, “Sir Joshua Reynolds thought it expedient to take the Italian School at its proudest climax as a starting-point for English Art. The last fifty years, however, have proved that his teaching was interpreted as encouragement to unoriginality of treatment, and neglect of that delicate rendering of nature which had led previous schools to greatness” (“Pre-Raphaelitism” 28-29). The brethren, according to William Michael Rossetti, “hated the cant about Raphael and the Great Masters, for utter cant it was in the mouths of such underlings of the brush as they saw all around them” (126).

time which the Pre-Raphaelites have adopted”, Ruskin pointed out during his 1854 lecture, “in choosing Raphael as the man whose works mark the separation between Mediaevalism and Modernism, is perfectly accurate” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 153).¹²⁶ Indeed it was, to such an extent that the conservative press quickly blamed the brethren’s practice for its mediaeval undertones. Collins, who in the autumn of 1853 had toured Italy with Dickens and had the chance of looking at Raphael’s *Transfiguration*, formed an impression of his own regarding the value of the painting later summarised in “To Think, or Be Thought For?”. And it was not a very enthusiastic one:

It may be that three figures clothed in gracefully fluttering drapery, and dancing at symmetrically exact distances from each other in the air, represent such an unearthly spectacle as that of the Transfiguration to the satisfaction of the great judges of art ... These things are matters of taste, on which I have the misfortune to differ with the connoisseurs. Not feeling bold enough to venture on defending myself against the masters who are teaching to appreciate High Art, I can only look away from the upper part of the picture as quickly as possible. (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 196)

A few years after the publication of “To Think, or Be Thought For?”, one of these connoisseurs would be part of the complex jigsaw upon which the plot of Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) revolves. But for the moment, writing in 1856, the “unearthly spectacle” of Raphael’s *Transfiguration* occupied Collins’ thoughts. His assertion of not feeling bold enough to question the authority of the masters in questions of art was clearly a misleading one. The whole of “To Think, or Be Thought For?” is a straight and concise attack upon the self-appointed arbiters of taste who dealt with the general public as if they were a flock of

¹²⁶ See also *Pre-Raphaelitism* 68-69. According to Holman Hunt, it was precisely this criticism of the *Transfiguration* which prompted the name of Pre-Raphaelitism. When he and Millais shared their views with other students of the Royal Academy “they as *reductio ad absurdum* had said, ‘Then you are Pre-Raphaelite’” (“Pre-Raphaelitism” 32). William Michael Rossetti’s account seems to confirm the origin of the term: “It was with this feeling, and obviously not with any idea of actually imitating any painters who had preceded Raphael, that the youths adopted as a designation, instead of repelling as an imputation, the word Preraphaelite [*sic*]” (127). However, Holman Hunt gave quite a different account to Millais’ son after the death of his father. As the story goes, during the early days Dante Gabriel Rossetti persisted in calling the style of Millais and Hunt “Early Christian” because of Maddox Brown. Hunt protested because of the necessary confusion that was to follow with the work of the German Quattrocentists: “I went on to convince him that our real name was ‘Pre-Raphaelites,’ a name which we had already so far revealed in frequent argument ... He thereupon, with a pet scheme of an extended co-operation still in mind, amended my previous suggestion by adding to our title of ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ the word ‘Brotherhood’” (qtd. in Millais 49).

sheep unable to judge for themselves the real value of a painting.¹²⁷ Collins could not be more explicit in pointing out who were the main culprits for the stagnation of art criticism in the country. From his point of view, long ago a few men inspired by Reynolds' lectures had established a rule of taste that did not allow dissident voices to flourish: with good reason they thought of themselves as masters in the appreciation of High Art. The praise bestowed on Raphael's *Transfiguration* was simply another instance of the pernicious legacy left by the first president of the Royal Academy, a painting whose complete lack of "the standard of dramatic truth, or, in one word, of Nature" (Collins, "To Think, or Be Thought For?" 196) was appalling. This supposed masterwork was an irrefutable proof of the obnoxious arbitrariness of taste in the hands of a supercilious elite, an argument that Collins' eventful trip to Italy further confirmed. Stopping at Milan he found difficult to share the enthusiasm of those who canted about art towards Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper—they "talk in raptures of this picture" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 107). The enthusiasm, if anything, did not extend to Collins: "It is not a *picture*", he bemoaned, "it is the utter ruin of something which *was once* a picture" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 107). Successive restorations had radically transformed Leonardo's work and only a slight impression of what once had been the majestic face of Christ was left, to the point that the original aspect of the composition could only be guessed. The picture was "in short, just recognisable as a picture with a great many figures in it—and that is all. Anybody who pretends to be able to see anything of Leonardo da Vinci's services in it now, pretends to achieve a downright possibility" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 107). But nothing of this mattered to those who cantered about Art neither in 1853 during Collins' trip to Italy nor by the time of publication of "To Think, or Be Thought For?". According to Collins, art criticism was rotten to the core, being the playground of an upper social class thoroughly disconnected from reality. And that disconnection had been long in the making.

¹²⁷ However, Collins' encounter with Raphael's *Sposalizio* in Milan did not go so badly. This was "a picture that really deserves its reputation", as he wrote in one of his letters. "Nothing to approach the divine beauty and refinement of some of the [erased words] in the composition has been painted since Raphael's time" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 107). Perhaps this was a spectacle not so unearthly as the one given by the *Transfiguration*.

4.2 THE FORGOTTEN POPULAR SYMPATHY

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Constitution of Church and State* (1828), reflecting on the changes affecting English society in the first decades of the century, posited the convenience of a social class dedicated exclusively to ameliorate the knowledge of those ignorant of the most elemental facts: “A certain smaller number were to remain at the fountainhead of the humanities, in cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed, and in watching over the interests of physical and moral science; being likewise the instructors of such as constituted, or were to constitute, the remaining more numerous classes of the order”, Coleridge argued. “The objects and final intention of the whole order being these—to preserve the stores and to guard the treasures of past civilisation, and thus to bind the present with the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 78). Coleridge’s proposal echoed the one made by Adam Smith of a selected group of people entrusted with the mission of furnishing the “vast multitudes that labour” with thought and reason. The same sense of cultural elitism that pervaded Smith’s account is present in Coleridge, who went a step further than the Scottish philosopher when he proposed as a rule of behaviour for the “very few” the idea of cultivation, that is, “those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 77).¹²⁸ The chosen ones were meant to fight against the disintegrating forces of the age, aiming “to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, the quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for the understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the duties correspondent” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 78). Putting it more bluntly, Coleridge wanted to train shepherds to take care of the sheep. The point, never stressed enough I think, is the pervading influence of Coleridge’s cultural elitism on nineteenth century aesthetic thought despite—or precisely because of—the democratisation of art appreciation prompted by capitalist development. The narcissistic, solipsistic and aristocratic world of the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* was, from my point of view, the

¹²⁸ As a matter of fact, Coleridge used for the first time the word “cultivation” to mean a general condition, a very particular state of mind. Following Raymond Williams, this word is influenced by “the force of the important eighteenth-century adjective cultivated” (*Culture and Society* 76). Later in the century what Coleridge termed cultivation was renamed *culture*.

unintended outcome of the thesis expounded in the *Constitution of Church and State*.¹²⁹ In fact, the whole of Collins' "To Think, or Be Thought For?" can be read as a response to Coleridge's proposals, a rebuttal of patronising attitudes that kept knowledge in the hands of a supercilious elite of art connoisseurs. As Collins further elaborated in his article:

We members of the general public may admire Hamlet and Don Giovanni, honestly, along with the critics, but the two sublimest pictures (according to the learning authorities) which the world has yet beheld, appeal to none of us; and we leave them, altogether discouraged on the subject of Art for the future. From that time forth we look at pictures with a fatal self-distrust. Some of us recklessly take our opinions from others; some of us cautiously keep our opinions to ourselves; and some of us indolently abstain from having anything to do with an opinion at all. ("To Think, or Be Thought For?" 197)

Such was the consequence of leaving the judgment of art in the hands of a supercilious elite, that small number suggested by Coleridge as the fountainhead of the humanities. There was no aesthetic of the general public in mid-century England, only the one dictated by those self-appointed to teach—an intolerable situation that lasted way too long. Collins favoured a democratic approach to art at odds with the aristocratic understanding of it, an appreciation of the beautiful grounded on day-to-day reality heavily indebted to the aesthetic proposed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Raphael's *Transfiguration* proved as unpalatable to Collins as to Holman Hunt who thought the painting remarkable, if remarkable at all, by its complete lack of adherence to truth and the disgusting theatricality of its characters. But his was a criticism confined to artistic circles, never addressed to the readership of a widely circulated magazine under the editorship of one of leading writers of the time. The only attempt of providing Pre-Raphaelitism with a coherent body of doctrine, it is worth bearing in mind, had been the

¹²⁹ Raymond Williams understands Coleridge's thought as the inevitable response to the unstoppable forces unleashed by industrialism. Cultivation or culture—"the ground, the necessary antecedent condition, of both ... permanency and progressiveness" (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 76)—was a reworking of the eighteenth century ideal of personality, a kind of individual qualification necessary in order to be part of polite society. As Williams further argued, "[w]e can now see that as a result of the changes in society at the time of the Industrial Revolution, cultivation could not be taken for granted as a process, but had to be stated as an absolute, an agreed centre for defence" which explains why Coleridge "examined the constitution of the State, and proposed the endowment within it of a class dedicated to the preservation and extension of cultivation" (*Culture and Society* 77). See Williams, *Culture and Society* 77-78 for a discussion of this cultural elite.

short-lived journal *The Germ*.¹³⁰ It rested to the sympathisers of the movement, like Ruskin or Collins, to systematise the thought of the brethren in the press. As far as I know, neither Millais nor Holman Hunt dared to publish an open letter in *The Times* defending their new aesthetic as Ruskin did. Theirs was a restraint unknown to Collins who could not understand why either the *Sistine Chapel* or the *Transfiguration* were “critically and officially considered, to this day, as the two masterworks of the highest school of painting” when, as he bluntly asserted, they were simply “two of the worst of many palpably bad and barbarous works of past times” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197). One wonders whether Dickens, who edited Collins’ article applying minor corrections, arched his eyebrows when reading such a take on the state of painting appreciation in the mid-century. Most probably he already knew what could be expected from his friend.

The official account emanating from the learned authorities in matters of art, Collins argued, could not resist critical examination. However, contrary to the prevailing mood, he had no interest whatsoever in telling people how to behave: “It is no part of my object to attempt to impose my own taste and preferences on others” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197). That was the self-appointed task of the connoisseurs and those who sided with them. Collins had other interests in mind:

I want—if I may be allowed, to repeat my motives once more in the plainest terms—to do all I can to shake the influence of authority in matters of Art, because I see that authority standing drearily and persistently aloof from all popular sympathy; because I see it keeping pictures and the people apart ... And what remedy against this? I say at the end, as I

¹³⁰ I have consulted the four published numbers of the journal bound in one volume of roughly 194 pages held at the British Library. *The Germ*, bearing the subtitle of *Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art*, was a complete commercial failure. As far as I know, only Philip Gilbert Hamerton noticed amongst contemporaries the lack of written records issued by the brethren: “It is of course difficult to prove positively that any artist of the realist school is or is not a Pre-Raphaelite”, wrote Hamerton, “because the Pre-Raphaelites have never publicly defined their doctrines; wisely leaving the public and the critics to find them out as they best might, and by this policy reserving much liberty of action” (188). However, Hamerton seems to have his reservations about this act of wisdom since the reader, if asked to give a definition of a Pre-Raphaelite picture, will find the task quite daunting: “I venture to add that he will not be able to construct such a definition at all without including some of the *defects* of Pre-Raphaelitism” (Hamerton 185). Holman Hunt’s recollections of the Brotherhood, it is worth bearing in mind, were originally published in 1904-5.

said at the beginning, the remedy is to judge for ourselves, and to express our opinions, privately and publicly, on every possible occasion, without hesitation, without compromise, without reference to any precedents whatever. (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197)

Collins’ appeal to the “popular sympathy” and “the people” to overthrow the authority of those who hold the authority in matters of Art is all the more relevant for being done in a time, the middle of the 1850s, when the events of 1848 still lingered on the air. The disregard for precedents endorsed by Collins has, I think, echoes of a revolutionary language that verged on populism of an aesthetic kind. Collins, it is worth bearing in mind, was a producer of literary commodities for a market of recent creation: technical improvements had prompted a revolution in the production of the printed word that eventually allowed the appearance of the professional man of letters in the nineteenth century. Painting, nonetheless, was still heavily conditioned by the slow progress of mechanical means of reproduction. A black and white daguerreotype could not capture the bright colours of, for instance, Michael Angelo’s *Sistine Chapel*. Consequently, a direct encounter with the work of art was mandatory to get a worthy impression of it. The National Gallery, as it follows, was key for the project of aesthetic democracy envisioned by Collins:

Public opinion has had its victories in other matters, and may yet have its victory in matters of Art. We, the people, have a gallery that is called ours [the National Gallery]; let us do our best to have it filled for the future with pictures (no matter when or by whom painted) that we can get some honest enjoyment and benefit from. Let us ... say plainly once for all, that the sort of High Art which is professedly bought *for us*, and which does actually address itself to nobody but painters, critics and connoisseurs, is not High Art at all, but the lowest of the Low. (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197)

Collins was not alone in his lack of appreciation towards the so-called High Art. Ruskin, on the very same year of the publication of Collins’ article, had praised Holman Hunt’s *The Scapegoat* as a commendable picture leaving aside its faults: it promised more future greatness to the nation’s schools of painting “than all the works of ‘high art’ that since the founda-

tion of the Academy have ever taxed the wonder, or weariness, of the English public” (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 219). As the mid-century advanced, and the commodification of culture spread, the split between the general public and a supercilious elite of art connoisseurs became more evident. If, according to Collins, the nation comprised more than a small group of learned authorities, then it was sheer madness to leave the purchasing policy of the main gallery of the country into the hands of a clique. Painters, critics and connoisseurs alike showed no interest whatsoever for the general public. The National Gallery, arguably the supposed gallery of the people, was arranged in accordance with the whims and fancies of the cultured circles that favoured the exhibition of horrendous works of art to satisfy their obnoxious taste—not by chance Collins, in his private correspondence, called it “the corrupt institution” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 149). It was a situation all the more painful since the National Gallery had been created with the aim of improving the condition of the working classes, another tool to cohere the social body of the country after the passing of the Reform Bill.¹³¹ And the country was indeed in need of cohesion: “In the year 1832 when I was 8 years old”, Collins recollected, “my poor father was informed that he would have his windows broken if he failed to illuminate in honour of the passing of the First Reform Bill”. It was not an easy thing to do for William Collins though:

He was a high Tory and sincerely religious man—he looked on the Reform Bill and the cholera (then prevalent) as similar judgements of an offended Deity punishing social and political “backslidings”. And he had to illuminate—and, worse still, he had to see his two boys mad with delight at being allowed to set up the illuminations. Before we were sent to bed, the tramp of the people was heard in the street. They were marching six abreast (the people were in earnest in those days) provided with stones, and with their officers in command. They broke every pane of glass in an unilluminated house, nearly opposite to our house, in less than one minute. I ran out to see the fun, and when the sovereign people cheered for the Reform Bill, I cheered too. (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 541)

¹³¹ For an account of the early decades of the National Gallery, see Jonathan Conlin’s *The Nation’s Mantelpiece* pp. 47-69. The institution had been established in 1824 when the House of Commons agreed to purchase the art collection of the deceased banker John Julius Angerstein. A looser access than the British Museum was intended for the National Gallery, being opened, with no admission fee, “to the indolent as well as the busy—to the idle as well as the industrious” (qtd. in Conlin 205).

Such enthusiasm, it can be argued, did not extend to Collins' father. Be that as it may, there is no doubt of the tensions threatening the social fabric of the country at the very beginning of the Victorian era. Crucially, as the years went by, the spread of taste was thought as the much needed remedy to calm down a situation spiralling out of control: "In the present times of political excitement, the exacerbation of angry and unsocial feelings might be much softened by the effects which the fine arts had ever produced upon the minds of men", Robert Peel declared to the House of Commons. "Of all expenditure, that like the present, was the most adequate to confer advantage on those classes which had but little leisure to enjoy the most refined species of pleasure. The rich might have their own pictures, but those who had to obtain their bread by their labour, could not hope for such an enjoyment" (qtd. in Minihan 56-57). Peel's approach, far from being a novelty, was thoroughly indebted to the eighteenth-century belief in the salutary effects of art: an educated populace, the argument followed, was supposed to behave accordingly.¹³² As the Victorian era advanced, it was commonly agreed that political unrest could be, if not erased, at least mitigated by the improvement of art education amongst the masses. Reading Collins' "To Think, or Be Thought For?", however, it is inevitable to conclude that the salutary effects intended by the spread of the fine arts had been curtailed by the nefarious influence of painters, critics and connoisseurs alike. The 1850s were indeed "an unsettling period of reform" (Conlin 71) for the National Gallery. Barely a few years had passed since the House of Commons' Select Committee undertook a whole review of the institution at Trafalgar Square when Collins published his article. And the results, at least according to Collins, were still waiting to be seen. Little had changed in art appreciation since the sovereign people cheered the Reform Bill, the rich still had their own pictures. And what had those striving to make a living? Nothing. Theirs was an art dictated by a selected few. In this sense, I think, "To Think, or Be Thought For?" can be read as the unofficial pamphlet of the project of aesthetic democracy intended for the "newly literate working-class audiences" (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89) that burst into prominence during the mid-

¹³² Jonathan Conlin points out how the Radicals soon took a keen interest in the National Gallery, helping to establish "two beliefs about the power of free displays of art that would become commonplace in any discussion of the National Gallery until the end of the century" (63). Firstly, Old Masters paintings could improve the quality of English manufacture. Secondly, free access to the National Gallery and other museums "would wean the working classes off drink, rough pastimes and political radicalism" (Conlin 66). However, such policy was also endorsed by conservatives like Robert Peel.

century. Collins, a producer of fiction dependent on his writing for a living, found no difficulty in sympathising with a class still excluded from the joys of aesthetic knowledge. Literature had been democratised to a great extent. It was time for painting to follow suit.

Collins’ request to fill the building at Trafalgar Square with pictures from which “we can get some honest enjoyment and benefit” not only meant the dismissal of the aesthetic supported by the cultural establishment of the time. It also entailed, I think, an acknowledgment of the kind of aesthetic proposed by Pre-Raphaelitism, a pictorial practice dismissive of the kind of High Art derided by Collins in “To Think, or Be Thought For?”. As Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote on the back cover of the first number of *The Germ*: “[t]he endeavour held in view throughout the writings on Art will be to encourage and enforce an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature; and also to direct attention, as an auxiliary medium, to the comparatively few works which Art has yet produced in this spirit” (50). It was certainly a simplicity not to be found in the pictures by Michael Angelo and Raphael with their idealised depictions of the heavenly realm. Rossetti—if it was Rossetti at all who wrote these words—was perfectly aware of the new terrain into which the brethren were intruding.¹³³ In January 1850, when these words were published, the amount of works either in writing or in painting reflecting the so much cherished “simplicity of nature” were indeed sparse. However, by the time of publication of “To Think, or Be Thought Of?”, Pre-Raphaelitism had produced enough paintings—and enough strong reactions—for Ruskin to boldly proclaim the establishment of a new school at the heart of the most prestigious art institution of the country, the Royal Academy.¹³⁴ Maybe Collins was so entrenched in his task of undermining the authority of the connoisseurs that he failed to notice the similarities of his argument with the brethren’s aesthetic. Or maybe by 1856 when Collins published his article the Pre-Raphaelite revolt against academic convention had become so embedded into the cultural discourse of the time that he did not realise the extent of his indebtedness. Most probably Collins was perfectly aware of the uselessness of writing about a movement that no longer existed. Neither Millais, being elect-

¹³³ The cover of anonymity under which the articles of *The Germ* were published makes any attribution dubious.

¹³⁴ See Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 207.

ed associate of the Royal Academy, nor Holman Hunt, having departed for the Middle East, thought of themselves as Pre-Raphaelites in 1856—only Ruskin kept labelling them as such. Collins, always extremely close to the brethren, knew better. Whatever took the place of Pre-Raphaelitism after the dissolution of the original brotherhood was something altogether different. In my view, Collins' denunciation of the purchasing policy carried out by those in charge of the National Gallery echoes the rebellious attitude of his close friends against the stultifying art orthodoxy derived from Sir Joshua Reynolds. In fact, Collins' lambasting attack on the sublimity and unearthly spectacle rendered by Michael Angelo and Raphael can be interpreted as a literary rendition of what John Everett Millais had done with his *Christ in the House of His Parents*, damaging the refined nostrils of highbrow connoisseurs with his depiction of the infant Jesus. The learned authorities, as Collins argued in "To Think, or Be Thought For?", could well marvel with the sublime figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Theirs was an authority that kept people apart from pictures, endorsing an aesthetic that exerted no appeal whatsoever upon the general public. The National Gallery, in short, did not live to its name, being merely a playground for painters, critics and connoisseurs alike. As Collins once mockingly wrote, "[b]eing an Englishman, I have, of course, an ardent attachment to anything like an established rule, simply because it is established" ("A Petition to the Novel-Writers" 483). It was precisely that attachment that prompted Collins to qualify the High Art promoted by the supposed gallery of the people as the lowest of the Low.

A much cleverer social commentator than usually is credited for, Collins well knew the implications of his aesthetic proposal to democratise the purchasing policy of the National Gallery. As matters stood, the institution at Trafalgar Square did not live up to its expectations, compromised as it was by the tight grasp of self-appointed teachers in matters of art.¹³⁵ Collins' scheme for a gallery of the people intended to break with the past in a radical way: "We shall shock the connoisseurs (especially the elderly ones) dreadfully by taking this course; we

¹³⁵ Collins' "The National Gallery and the Old Masters" (1856) was intended as further proof of the nonsense of the purchasing policy carried out by the National Gallery who presumably owned a Velazquez so much altered that it was difficult to spot the original composition. It was astounding, Collins argued, that this picture had been purchased "with the national money as a genuine article by constituted authorities who profess to be judges of the genuineness of pictures" ("The National Gallery and the Old Masters" 348).

shall get indignantly reprimanded by the critics, and flatly contradicted by the lecturers: but we shall also, sooner or later, get a collection of pictures bought for us that we, mere mankind, can appreciate and understand” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197-198). Collins’ appeal to “mere mankind” underlined the social bias that permeated the institution.¹³⁶ It was sheer madness to take into consideration the arguments of a bunch of people who consistently stood aloof “from all popular sympathy” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197). The firm grasp on the rule of taste still maintained by painters, critics and connoisseurs in the midst of the commercial mid-century was no longer sustainable. They needed to go. Supporting the new Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic or proudly displaying a coarse taste in the living rooms sprouting around suburbia, those wealthy enough to waste their money in art commodities were slowly undermining the core principles upon which the aristocracies of art and race had built their authority. As John Everett Millais wrote in 1852 at the peak of Pre-Raphaelitism, “[i]t is quite a ‘lark’ now to see the amiable letters I have from Liverpool and Birmingham merchants, requesting me to paint them pictures, any size, subject, and amount I like—leaving it all to me” (qtd. in Millais 172). The brethren, regardless of the harsh criticism mounted against them, never failed to find support to sustain their practice amongst a class unconcerned by tradition as the merchants of the biggest industrial cities were. Collins’ bold attack upon those who held in their hands the appreciation of painting reflected the changing cultural perceptions of a society that was being transformed by capitalist development. He saw the art orthodoxy of the time completely disconnected from day-to-day reality and sided with “the many who are expected to learn” instead of “the few who are appointed to teach” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194). Not surprisingly, the latter were not enticed by his proposal. Later on, when publishing some of his articles for *Household Words* in *My Miscellanies* (1863), Collins added a note that sheds light on the reaction of the few appointed to teach to his appeal for an aesthetic democracy of sorts. This was a paper, Collins wrote apropos “To Think, or Be Thought For?”, that “provoked some remonstrance both of the public and the private sort ... for speaking my mind (instead of keeping to myself, as other peo-

¹³⁶ Although Collins does not mention it, much of the fuss around the malfunctioning of the National Gallery was due to the confusing nature of the institution, at first conceived as an offshoot of the British Museum. Even when the gallery soon was recognised as a separate body, jurisdictional problems followed until the intervention of the Treasury in 1855. See Minihan 25.

ple did) on the subject of the Old Masters” (*My Miscellanies* 193). However, time did not abate in the least Collins’ aesthetic stand: “Finding, however, that my positions remained practically unrefuted”, he wrote, “and that my views were largely shared by readers with no ... vested critical rights in old pictures—and knowing, besides, that I had not written without some previous inquiry and consideration—I held steadily to my own convictions; and I hold to them still” (*My Miscellanies* 193). Collins had nothing to apologise for, the very same subject that had prompted the original publication of his article—“freedom of thought on the subject of the Fine Arts” (*My Miscellanies* 193)—being still relevant enough to justify its reissue. Little he knew when publishing “To Think, or Be Thought For?” how his call for an aesthetic democracy of sorts was to receive an enormous boost with a gigantic exhibition of art treasures intended, precisely, to help people at large to form their own opinions in matters of art.

5 “THE UNKNOWN PUBLIC” (1858)

If the Great Exhibition of 1851 confirmed the new status of England as producer of industrial commodities, the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 meant a crucial step in the democratisation of art. As Sir Austen Henry Layard put it, the event intended “to instruct the public, to improve public taste, and to furnish those who are prevented visiting the public galleries of Europe with the means of judging how far the illustrious painters, whose name have become household words, are worthy of their fame” (182). The first large public exhibition ever made of works of art from private collections, the Manchester event certainly marked a striking contrast with the exhibition at Hyde Park. The likes of Collins’ French dilettante Mr Scumble did not fail to notice a remarkable omission when attending the London event: “Of course, my friend, I have visited your Exhibition in Hyde Park. It is wonderful—sublime! The glory of France is represented there—it is most excellent, most stupendous! But pictures! Give me pictures! I must see pictures!” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 78). Indeed, there were pictures enough to be seen at the Art Treasures Exhibition, an enormous gathering of works of art until then confined to the private galleries of the country. About one million people approximately benefitted from an extensive railway system to reach the outskirts of Manchester where a newly built pavilion of glass and iron contained paintings “by Ancient Masters, Modern Pictures by Foreign Masters, the English School, the British Portrait Gallery, Drawings by the Old Masters, Engravings and Etchings, Ornamental Art, Oriental Art” (Stee-gman, *The Rule of Taste* 235). The scope, and ambition, of the exhibition rallied support from the highest institutions of the country, with Prince Albert praising the “usefulness of the undertaking ... [and the] educational direction which may be given to the whole scheme” (qtd. in Steegman, *The Rule of Taste* 235).¹³⁷ Indeed, it was an undertaking badly needed, Collins having depicted in his story of modern life a desolate environment filled by aesthetic monstrosities ranging from “the print of the Queen, hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top” to the “over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves” (*Basil* 53-54). The lack of proper

¹³⁷ It was a usefulness echoing that of the competition held from 1843 onwards to decorate the new Palace of Westminster. Prince Albert, head of the commission organised to supervise the undertaking, thought that the frescoes could “elevate the character and habits of the people” (qtd. in Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* 30).

training in art education was plainly visible in the awful aesthetic quality of the commodities cherished by the “newly literate working-class audiences” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89) that came into prominence in the mid-century. The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition acted—or intended to act—as a kind of corrective upon the growing aesthetic threat posited by a middle class confident enough to assert its own rule of taste without paying due attention to precedent. As a contemporary guide to the exhibition put it:

Those who have felt how much the temperate satisfaction of that craving [for art] calms, and purifies, and ennobles, will be most anxious that the appetite should spread, and that the means of gratifying it should be amply and grandly ministered. The more richly covered the table, the more free the access to it, the more numerous the guests, the wider their range of condition between highest and humblest. (*Handbook to the Gallery* 4)

That purification of sorts echoed the softening of angry and unsocial feelings by the fine arts encouraged not long ago by Robert Peel. Something needed to be done to improve the aesthetic discernment of the general public. The country demanded an educational direction, as Prince Albert put it. Mr Sherwin’s obnoxious taste was spreading fast, with Henry Morley’s narrator writing how “[a] person with my present correct principles of taste is naturally shocked every hour of his life in London” (“A House Full of Horrors” 61). The uneducated eye should be restrained and educated for aesthetic and political reasons. There was no doubt about the usefulness of the undertaking behind the Art Treasures Exhibition.

5.1 THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE MANY

“No longer ago than when Hazlitt wrote, English connoisseurs were stigmatised as a selfish class, who chiefly valued their treasures because nobody else could derive pleasure from them”, W. H. Wills wrote in *Household Words* the very same year of Manchester event. “They played the Blue Bard with all the beauty they could get into their possession. They locked it up; would admit only a chosen few to a share of their enjoyment, and even those under strin-

gent conditions and vigilant surveillance” (“The Manchester School of Art” 349). Indeed, English connoisseurs had been extremely protective of their works of art, treasuring beauty away from the masses for long. But a change of attitude was perceptible at the very beginning of the mid-century that did not escape Collins’ attention. In his series “The Pictures-Galleries of England” (1851) for *Bentley’s Miscellany*, Collins took the reader on a tour of the private art collections open to the public by the initiative of their owners. Now it was possible for those interested to look at “the works of the old Masters in the possession of individual noblemen and gentlemen” (Collins, “The Pictures-Galleries of England” 79). The kind of English connoisseur of which Hazlitt had written about no longer held the authority of before. Some amongst that selfish class were willing to share the pleasure afforded by their precious objects. As time went by, beauty stopped being locked up—paradoxically by the very same men who had stubbornly refused for long to partake it. Little did the young Collins know, writing at the very beginning of his literary career, how this remarkable openness amongst certain art collectors was to crystallise a few years later in a gigantic exhibition of works of art for the better aesthetic improvement of the public at large. The Manchester event indeed challenged the understanding of the aesthetic experience as limited to a selected few. And credit should be given to a new breed of English connoisseurs: “In their belief—contrary to that of their fathers—that the value of their Art-possession is increased rather than diminished by wide appreciation, instead of confining, they feel a pride in extending the bounds of sympathy with their own tastes—a sympathy which flatters the judgment that made the objects of it their property” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349). The flattery, nonetheless, was relative. Had Prince Albert not been enthused by the educational purpose of the exhibition, lending remarkable works of art from the royal collection, most probably the connoisseurs’ treasures would have remained confined to their art galleries.¹³⁸ But they did not, and eventually the “glorious enterprise that is to awaken the million to a sense of the beautiful in Art” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349) was made possible because of their support and the courage of those who risked their money for an event of such uncertain results. Seventy wealthy Mancunians guaranteed one thousand pounds each in order to undertake a task of du-

¹³⁸ Some connoisseurs refused to lend their works of art afraid as they were that “the uneducated would resent the rarity of such opportunities, by carving their names on statues and defacing pictures, the beauties of which they could have no cognisance of” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349).

bious profit showing themselves “to be true patrons of art” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 351). However, theirs was a very particular kind of patronage, a patronage thoroughly indebted to the factories sprouting around mid-century Manchester. The money bestowed on the Art Treasures Exhibition was quite a recent one, a rather intended consequence of the spread of capitalist development in past decades. Indeed, the whole enterprise must be approached as an extraordinary assertion of power by the new aristocracy of money for the better benefit of the uneducated many and the glory of their own city.¹³⁹ Acting in the way they did, these wealthy Mancunians set a fatal blow to Hazlitt’s notion of selfish connoisseurship. Beauty was no longer to be kept at the mercy of a few, not in the commercial mid-century. At least that was the intention.

Of the one million souls that travelled to Manchester enthused by the Art Treasures event the poor class bore a little fraction: the price to be paid to gain entrance—a shilling a head—put off many from attending. The Manchester event was indeed a tempting Art-banquet but of limited appeal. And some visitors’ ingrained lack of interest in the subject only made things worse: “Although the originators of the great Art Exhibition cannot have been disappointed at the general results of their scheme”, W. H. Wills argued, “it is notorious that the hope of its attracting the humbler classes in sufficient numbers to occasion a great impulse to their sluggish appreciation of the Fine Arts, has nearly failed” (“The Manchester School of Art” 350). Attractions like the Knot-Mill Fair or the Belle Vue Gardens proved far more successful than the Manchester event.¹⁴⁰ The humbler classes simply did not care about the art showcase: “The plain fact is, that a collection of pictures of various ‘schools’ excited no interest, and affords but little pleasure to the uninstructed eye”, W. H. Wills confidently asserted. “The touch of the Italian painter or of the Flemish painter, or the German, French, or English painter, of-

¹³⁹ The political agenda behind the exhibition has been emphasised by Elizabeth A. Pergam: “The conscious attempt by the Mancunian Executive Committee to dissociate their undertaking from the stain of the impure world of business and moneymaking was a critical aspect of their overarching goal to disprove the prevailing characterisation of a city consumed by the pursuit of financial profit” (5).

¹⁴⁰ The Knott-Mill Fair was an annual pleasure fair in Manchester starting on Easter Monday and filled with stalls of different sorts from fortune tellers to performances of cheap plays. The so-called Belle Vue Gardens had been founded in 1836 as a zoo achieving extraordinary fame in the north of England during the mid-century. Not even the chance of attending the Manchester event for free aroused the interest of the uneducated.

fers to him no subject for discrimination” (“The Manchester School of Art” 350). An enormous cultural gap prevented the lowest classes from improving their aesthetic education: they simply could not understand what they were looking at when approaching a painting. The working man “sees groups of figures in hard and falsely-contrasted colours, with hands like gloves, arms grooving angularly out of trunks like ill-grafted branches, and he looks no longer and no further” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 350).¹⁴¹ His was a thorough lack of interest that left little hope for improvement, although the Manchester event proved successful enough for some in attendance: the true amateur. Penny catalogues of the exhibition like *A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings* (1857) noticed how those whose leisure and circumstances allowed to pay frequent visits to the exhibition could expect a great benefit in return. They meant to be a minority, nonetheless, since the event “will have many visitors whose time will not permit such systematic study; many whose tastes in art may not incline them to devote serious consideration to the ancient masters” (*A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings* 12). But at least the picture-loving few had plenty of reasons to be enthralled. The whole event was so innovative and utterly different from anything done before that it was impossible not to marvel at the scale of it: “Three long, well-proportioned galleries” greeted the visitors who were able to look at “cases filled with priceless Art-objects in the precious metals, in ivory and in wood, and with jewels, bijouterie, and rare carvings” in addition to “trophies of warlike Art composed of arms and armour; and admirable orchestra discoursing most excellent music; and, lastly, the moving spectacle of well-dressed, ever-changing company, always delightfully sprinkled with Lancashire witchcraft, which spreads its incantations (and its ample drapery) broadcast over the scene” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 351). All this display was organised around a chronological criteria never essayed before and that set a standard for exhibitions to follow.¹⁴² This “enormous and unsurpassed casket of gems”, a palace of crystal connected with every part of the country through a railway terminus, was indeed a prodigy of organisation and design, a matter of national pride that reflected the extraordinary progress of the country—a triumph of the mid-Victorian drive

¹⁴¹ “The only school he has the wit to recognise is the school of Nature” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 350).

¹⁴² The characteristic labels familiar to us providing information about the painting and its author were unknown at the time.

for rationalisation and classification. Eventually, the technical advances of past decades had coalesced in the biggest exhibition of works of art ever made. Planning, execution, resolution: the same thought that sustained the development of industrialism had been successfully applied for the benefit of the aesthetic education of the nation. The patronage of the wealthy Mancunians who rallied in support of the exhibition would have come to nothing without the business-like manner in which their money was employed. Indeed, the way the whole scheme had been carried out was an impressive tale of capitalism's resourcefulness.¹⁴³ For Dickens, "[t]he collection of Pictures in the Exhibition is wonderful ... The care for the common people, in the provision made for their comfort and refreshment, is also admirable, and worthy of all commendation" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 8: 399). However, when thinking about the (intended) salutary aesthetic effects of the event upon the general public, he was far from confident: "But they want more amusement, and particularly (as it strikes me) *something in motion*, though it were only a twisting fountain", Dickens wrote to one correspondent. "The thing is too still after their lives of machinery, and Art fires over their heads in consequence" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 8: 399).¹⁴⁴ Of a similar conclusion was W. H. Wills, Dickens' second in charge at *Household Words*, when assessing the outcome of the exhibition: "Setting aside the sight of so many beautiful objects enjoyed by a million pair of eyes", the former concluded, "the mere talk and discussion about art which it occasions, will materially conduce to the spread of a taste for and appreciation of art, among persons over whom it will exercise an especially good influence" ("The Manchester School of Art" 351-352)—in other words, the picture-loving few or the true amateur. People like the Lancashire folk, completely ignorant of how a painting should be approached, left the exhibition as they entered: in the same state of blissful aesthetic ignorance. And the same applied to

¹⁴³ "How, by the first of May in the present year, these [treasures] were conveyed and unpacked without a scratch; how arranged in their proper places,—the tiniest [*sic*] miniature and the biggest historical picture, the smallest signet ring and the hugest suit of armour,— how registered ticketed, catalogued and placed, the executive committee, and Mr. John Deane, the general commissioner, can only tell" (Wills, "The Manchester School of Art" 351).

¹⁴⁴ Of a similar opinion was *The Art Journal* when reviewing the Manchester event. The workers' "puzzled anxiety" (qrd. in Pergam 205) showed the constraints of the educational enterprise. Eventually, the event was marred by a lack of foresight: "We now understand that an Art-Treasures Exhibition closely resembles an army in the field: it is not enough for it to be composed of good materials, unless the good materials are well handled" (qtd. in Pergam 205).

those toiling under the weight of machinery. Art fired mercilessly over the heads of “the million-fingered public” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349).

The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition did not achieve the aesthetic redemption of the English mob. Neither the factory worker nor the farm labourer visiting the Manchester event were moved by the “glorious enterprise that is to awaken the million to a sense of the beautiful in Art” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349). The uninstructed eye, at least according to the men of *Household Words*, proved quite an unresponsive one. Collins, I suspect, would not have been surprised. He was enough acquainted with the humbler classes to notice how the readers of cheap penny journals were “evidently, in the mass, from not fault of theirs, still ignorant of almost everything which is generally known and understood among readers whom circumstances have placed, socially and intellectually, in the rank above them” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222). Blatant ignorance was indeed the reason behind the working man’s reluctance to look no longer and no further to the paintings on exhibition at Manchester. The inevitable shortcomings of awakening the million to a sense of the beautiful only accentuated as the mid-century progressed. A wealthy bunch of industrialists had poured incredible amounts of money into a gigantic exhibition of works of art intended to raise the standard of taste amongst the people at large. And what they did achieve? Little of consequence.¹⁴⁵ The million remained as devoid of aesthetic knowledge as ever. The main purpose of the Art Treasures Exhibition, in Prince Albert’s words, of training “the most uneducated eye to gather the lessons which ages of thought and scientific research have attempted to abstract” (qtd. in Ames, *Prince Albert and Victorian Taste* 149) had been a thorough failure. When given an opportunity for improvement, the “mob” simply walked away: “As with any temporary large-scale exhibition”, Elizabeth A. Pergam has remarked, “the organisers’ ideals were tempered by the realities of the undertaking and their lack of control over the reactions of the attendees” (7). To the multiplicity of audiences searched by the Executive Committee—“the art scholar (or ‘connoisseur’); the well-educated generalist with some art knowledge and experience of exhibition going; and those who had little or no previous exposure to the fine arts” (Pergam 8)

¹⁴⁵ “Unhappily, that prospect will be fulfilled, and these gentlemen will be losers in money, in consequence of their miscalculation of support from the working classes” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 351).

—has to be credited the debatable result of the event.¹⁴⁶ Only those trained in the language of Historical Art could *read* the story written on the walls of the gigantic glass galleries and, being neither the factory-worker nor the farm-labourer of that condition, the Art Treasures Exhibition simply did not leave any lasting impression on them. A huge gulf remained between the new patrons of art that sponsored the event and the “newly literate working-class audiences” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89)—provided they were literate at all. To my mind, Collins’ belief in the capabilities of the general public to approach great works of art was tested by the Manchester event. Every person, he had declared in “To Think, or To Be Thought For?” (1856), was perfectly capable of judging by itself the value of a painting without any kind of external direction. There was no need for intermediaries to understand a work of art, no requirement of being indoctrinated in the principles of good taste. However, what his colleagues saw at the Art Treasures Exhibition, the blatant lack of interest of the un-instructed eye, questioned Collins’ belief. Lacking the most elementary knowledge of art appreciation, the educational purpose of the Manchester event did not reach the common people. As it turned out, some sort of guidance in aesthetic matters was desperately needed. That, or Collins’ confidence on the capabilities of each individual to judge by himself was limited to a very particular set of public. Actually, it might well be possible that “To Think, or To Be Thought For?” was written with the readership of *Household Words* in mind: an audience cultured enough to grasp the wider implications of the purchasing policy carried out by the National Gallery and, therefore, to value accordingly Collins’ aesthetic stand—of which they were to become the main beneficiaries. There were indeed readers whose circumstances placed them, both socially and intellectually, in the rank above the factory worker attending the Art Treasures Exhibition. Little surprise then that the million’s sense of the beautiful remained still to be awakened.

W. H. Wills’ review of the Art Treasures Exhibition in *Household Words* was followed a few months later in the same pages by Henry Morley’s “Prattleton’s Monday Out” (1857), intend-

¹⁴⁶ The novelty of the enterprise did not help either: “How to present works of art representing a broad range of date and media to all these constituencies without the benefit of precedents upon which to call necessarily made the task at hand a difficult one” (Pergam 8).

ed to be a contribution by Isaac Prattleton, stonemason and dealer in monumental effigies with residence in East London, who took a day off with his family to visit the museums of the capital. The South Kensington Museum was a necessary stop. Created on the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851, most of the objects contributed by foreign nations to that event ended up forming the collection of the Kensington institution which comprised, among others, the pictures left by Mr Sheepshanks to the nation “on condition that use should be made of it in the education of the public taste, through schools of design and by way of exhibition” (“Prattleton’s Monday Out” 537)—indeed, as the academician Richard Redgrave remarked in his introduction to the catalogue of Sheepshanks’ bequest, his was “a noble gift which has been specially offered for the gratification of all” (3).¹⁴⁷ Sheepshanks’ Deed of Gift further elaborates on this point:

The said pictures and drawings shall be used ... for reference and instruction in the Schools of Art ... and ... shall be exhibited to the public at such times as shall not interfere with the arrangements of the said Schools ...; and so soon as arrangements can be properly made by him for that purpose, the public, and especially the working classes, shall have the advantage of seeing the collection on Sunday afternoons; it being, however, understood that the exhibition of the collection on Sundays is not to be considered as one of the conditions of my gift. (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 5)

It did not take long for arrangements to be made, with barely a few months having passed since the signature of the Deed of Gift until the publication of “Prattleton’s Monday Out” in December 1857. The Sheepshanks’ bequest, Redgrave further elaborated, was intended to be appreciated by a general public seen as incapable of aesthetic discernment: “A wrong impres-

¹⁴⁷ John Sheepshanks’ bequest of 233 paintings and drawings by modern artists such as Turner or Constable had been made that very same year of 1857. The catalogue, whose full title is *Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections deposited in the New Gallery, South Kensington. Being for the most part the gift of John Sheepshanks, Esq.* (1859), had a twofold function according to Richard Redgrave: to serve as a register of Mr Sheepshanks’ bequest to the nation and to inform the public of the paintings and authors on exhibition. It was later used in abridged form for the penny *Inventory of the Pictures, Drawings, Etching, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* of 1859 which lacks the biographical information on the painters provided by the *Catalogue*. The edition of the *Catalogue* available at the British Library that I consulted comprises 110 pages.

sion is only too widely entertained that art does *not* appeal to the multitude but only to those specially educated to appreciate it” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 12).¹⁴⁸ On the contrary, a sense of the beautiful was ingrained in every human being, art appreciation far from being restricted to the selected few.¹⁴⁹ It was precisely in response to Sheepshanks’ wish, the aesthetic gratification of the working classes, that Mr Prattleton and his family intended to profit from the free Monday admission. What they found at South Kensington is a museum in full activity with one part of it “travelling about the provinces to diffuse the ideas that belong to it” and coming back “into barracks at Kensington, to take the place of another part that sets out its turn” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 537)—the institution’s educational policy being duly carried out. But the acquisition of a better knowledge in matters of art was not without danger. Strolling around the curiosities on display, Mrs Boroo, Mr Prattleton’s mother-in-law, is suddenly shocked to the core: “What is that?”, she asks half breathing. “That is a dustman”, replies Mr. Prattleton. “He has washed his face, that’s certain, and has exchanged his shovel-hat for a found-and-ninepenny silk; but them’s dustman’s boots, them’s dustman’s corduroys, and

¹⁴⁸ Kensington, in the mid-century a borough still to be fully developed, seemed to Sheepshanks the perfect place for his collection which “should be placed in a gallery in an open and airy situation, possessing the quiet necessary to the study and enjoyment of works of Art, and free from the inconveniences and dirt of the main thoroughfares of the metropolis ... whereas I consider that such a gallery might be usefully erected at Kensington, and be attached to the Schools of Art in connexion with the Department of Science and Art now established there” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 4). Sheepshanks made an explicit appeal to the patrons of art to support the growing collection of the South Kensington Museum: “with the view to the establishment of such a collection, and in the hope that other proprietors of pictures and others works of Art may be induced to further the same object, I have determined to make such a conditional gift of the original pictures and drawings ... which I possess” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 4)

¹⁴⁹ Redgrave’s confidence in the aesthetic capabilities of the general public proved contradictory: “We are created with senses capable of culture”, he wrote, “and as the Indian becomes acute of hearing and keen of vision by constant exercise of these bodily senses, so those which are intellectual may be cultured and improved: and this constitutes the high mission of the artist, and that which renders him a public benefactor—that his art stimulates mental culture” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 13). From this naturally follows an exclusion of those not intellectual enough to be improved. Redgrave, to his credit, realised the contradiction underpinning his argument: “Nor does this culture contradict the first assertion, that art appeals directly to the multitude; there may be a difference in degree, there is none in kind, and as far beauty and expression go, the painter appeals to all, knowing in that in these respects ‘the whole earth’ is still ‘of some language and one speech’” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 13). But a difference of degree could prove fatal in the appreciation of art. Neither Michael Angelo’s *David* nor Turner’s *Yacht Squadron at East Cowes* appealed to the many, as the anonymous writer of “Prattleton’s Monday Out” was forced to concede. The *tabula rasa* argument, when applied to the contemplation of art, simply did not sustain close examination. It was blatantly untrue, as anyone attending the South Kensington Museum on a Monday evening knew, that “all can judge of the painter’s art” (qtd. in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections* 13).

that’s a dustman’s gabardine, with the dust still powdered across the shoulders” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 537). Mrs Boroo’s agitation before the sight of the lower orders is toned down by her son-in-law, Mr Prattleton, reminding her that little threat poses a dustman slouching around and looking with the same air of ignorance that a gentleman has. However, as the stonemason soon realises, the dustman is hardly an exception: “We soon found that among the throng in this museum on Monday night a dustman was no oddity”, notes Mr Prattleton, “But I do say that a line ought to be drawn. I like improvement of the mind, and I do try myself to elevate the taste of my own family. But a line ought to be drawn somewhere above dustmen. Is a respectable householder to be expected to consort with such?” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 537). He firmly doubts it, although Mr Dickens might well differ since he was the sort of person who would agree with the dustman “that after he has been ferreting all day long, in dust holes, the nation should invite such a man, if he will take the trouble of a walk to South Kensington, to give his eyes a rest over bright rainbow thoughts hung in gilt frames—over a sight of the free gifts of nature and the hard-won earnings of art” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 538). But why that invitation did not take into consideration the other visitors of the institution, Mr Prattleton is at a loss to understand. Dickens and the likes of him no doubt cherished the improvement of the mind that the South Kensington Museum afforded. The Sheepshanks’ bequest had been made exactly in response to that need: “The collection”, points out the stonemason, “consists mainly of those works which an untrained public can enjoy before it understands their higher claims upon attention” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 539).¹⁵⁰ Therefore its great appeal. Mr Prattleton, however, found taxing enough to cope with the lowest social classes in their quest for a better aesthetic education: “You’ll tell me that this dustman striving to get thoughts beautiful or wise into his head is, in such act, the equal of a stonemason, the equal of a prince. The equal of a prince, no doubt ... but that he is fit company for anyone in our sphere I deny” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 538). And the same could be said of the hodmen who idle in the architectural

¹⁵⁰ One wonders whether William Collins’ landscapes, part of Sheepshanks’ bequest, were also on display. Nine paintings by Wilkie Collins’ father were included in Sir John Sheepshanks’ gift according to the *Inventory of the pictures, drawings, etchings &c. in the British Fine Arts Collections deposited in the new gallery at Cromwell Gardens, South Kensington* (16). Two paintings by Alexander Geddes, Collin’s maternal grandfather, are also listed in the *Inventory* alongside three works by Margaret Carpenter (nee Geddes), sister of Collins’ mother. Seven oil paintings by David Wilkie, Collins’ godfather, were also part of Sheepshanks’ bequest.

department of the Kensington institution. If they wish to improve their aesthetic education one wonders why they should do so in company of Mr Prattleton's family: "Let them go up the ladder of learning, if they please, but not while my wife's mother is upon it" (Morley, "Prattleton's Monday Out" 538). But the stonemason's request was a completely useless one. The very same existence of the South Kensington Museum obeyed to the broadening of that ladder which only enlarged even more when men like Sheepshanks decided to bequest their art treasures to public institutions—or lend them for public exhibition. Dustmen striving to get thoughts beautiful into their heads felt entitled to mix with their betters no matter how deep was Mr Prattleton's contempt. In that regard, they were indeed the equal of a prince.

Reading Morley's "Prattleton's Monday Out" alongside W. H. Wills' "The Manchester School of Art", a remarkable picture emerges upon the development of taste in the year of the Art Treasures Exhibition from the standpoint of a weekly journal directed to a middle-class readership and whose editorial staff Collins had recently joined. Both the factory-worker and the farm-labourer, W. H. Wills argued, lacking the most elemental aesthetic education, profited nothing from their visit to the Manchester event. Those looking at the paintings in the Saloon B of Ancient Masters of Manchester gigantic glass pavilion could turn to page eight of *A Peep at the Pictures* to learn about Venice, "the city of waters", where Titian "was born and lived to be 99 years old" (8).¹⁵¹ However, the educational purpose of this cheap catalogue—"we have only to hope that we have added in some slight degree to the enjoyment and instruction to be derived from the Art Treasures Exhibition" (*A Peep at the Pictures* 31)—remained questionable as far as the experience of the men of *Household Words* went. Too much stillness confronted common people for the spectacle to be enjoyed, Dickens thought. And too much sheer ignorance derailed any effort to improve their minds. W. H. Wills' approach echoed in Morley's "Prattleton's Monday Out" with its depiction of the social tensions derived from the

¹⁵¹ According to Elizabeth A. Pergam, *A Peep at the Pictures* offers what amounts to a "crash course on the 'most celebrated painters of in the Ancient Schools'" (105). Following Morley's "Prattleton's Monday Out", those willing to spend a penny could enhance their experience with a guide of the main attractions of the South Kensington museum as Mr Prattleton does when purchasing the catalogue of the Animal Products gallery where woven goods of all sorts are on exhibition. This catalogue, as it turns out, has a salutary effect on the stonemason who makes up his mind for a second visit to the Kensington institution "because it has made [the catalogue] all of us curious about some things we didn't see at all, and some we didn't understand when we first saw them" ("Prattleton's Monday Out" 539).

evolving democratisation of taste in mid-century England. The account given by Morley’s opinionated stonemason questioned any confidence in the betterment of the lower orders through art education. Michael Angelo’s cast of *David* at the South Kensington Museum goes completely unnoticed by the crowd: “I did not perceive a single glance, even of curiosity, turned up at it; I watched in vain for a man, woman or child who would take the trouble to look David in the face”, Mr Prattleton writes. “Had the statue been absent, there could scarcely have been less heed paid to the empty space than to the space now so gloriously filled” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 538-539). Many, as Morley’s stonemason remarked, thought that the nation had indeed a duty to invite hard labouring men to South Kensington in order to provide them with some spiritual rest when looking at beautiful objects. Indeed, quite a few thought this way, the highest institutions of the country increasingly worried about a social body whose lack of cohesiveness posited quite a threat for the welfare of the nation. To my mind, the wealthy Mancunians behind the Art Treasures Exhibition were merely replicating the government’s policy as exemplified by the South Kensington Museum. In this sense, Sheepshanks’ bequest of modern paintings and drawings to the Kensington institution, a palliative to the disastrous art education of the humbler classes, meant a recognition of the complex social and cultural landscape of the mid-century. Sheepshanks understood his art collection as a tool for the much-needed aesthetic improvement of “the million-fingered public” (Wills, “The Manchester School of Art” 349).¹⁵² Had he succeeded? If success was to be measured by the number of people attending the South Kensington Museum, yes. But what kind of aesthetic discernment got the throng of visitors strolling around, that was difficult to ascertain. A stonemason unable to spell the name of an Egyptian pharaoh but eager to dismiss the right of the lower classes to improve their art education was indeed a remarkable achievement. In this sense, only in the mid-century when the project of aesthetic democracy was gaining momentum could such a character have a *raison d’être*. But the likes of Mr Prattleton were clearly outnumbered by the two or three thousand men and women whose art knowledge remained as scanty as ever after a Monday evening visit to the Kensington institu-

¹⁵² Sheepshanks’ Deed of Gift is clear in this point. By the act of the Deed he transfers his collection of pictures and drawings to John Stanley, Baron of Alderley “or other member of Her Majesty’s Government for the time being charged with the promotion of Art Education, now undertaken by the Department of Science and Art” (qtd. in *Inventory of the pictures, drawings, etchings &c. in the British Fine Arts Collections* 4). The Deed only took effect when a suitable gallery in Kensington was built to accommodate the paintings.

tion: “The settlers were all occupied”, observed the stonemason when walking the sculpture gallery, “but the occupants were talking to each other, resting, doing anything but looking at the works of art” (Morley, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” 538). In this sense, “Prattleton’s Monday Out” brings to mind W. H. Wills’ bleak analysis of the humbler classes attending the Art Treasures Exhibition. Both factory-workers and farm-labourers alike left the Manchester event with little, if any, improvement of the mind. And so it happened with the dustmen and hodmen rambling through Kensington’s galleries trying to get thoughts beautiful or wise into their heads. John Sheepshanks’ magnanimity, big as it was, proved quite unappealing to them. The education of common people could not be taken for granted.

5.2 CHEAP KNOWLEDGE

The publication of the second edition of *Things Not Generally Known* (1856) by John Timbs provided Collins with the perfect excuse to reflect upon the hazardous path towards cultural improvement in mid-century England. Published in the pages of *Household Words*, Collins’ “Deep Design on Society” (1857) tells of the struggle of an anonymous narrator to acquire knowledge in a society that devalues it systematically:

Everything else that I want, I can get easily. My apartments (furnished, in an excellent neighbourhood), my little tasteful dinner, my gentlemanly clothing, my comfortable reserved seat at public amusements; my neat carriage, to take me out and bring me home; my servant, who bears with my small caprices, and takes troubles of all kinds off my hands—these accessories, which revolve round the great fact of my existence, come obediently at my call whenever I want them, and dance attendance, in excellent time, to the faintest jingle of my silver and gold. (49)

Knowledge, however, does not come so easily. It “scorns an invitation from me, even when I deliver it myself at the end of my purse; wants my time instead of my money, and my patience instead of my patronage; expects me to follow, where I am accustomed to lead; meets me, in short, on audaciously equal terms, and, as a natural and proper consequence, fails to

enjoy the honour of my acquaintance” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 49). Knowledge, in other words, requires a certain submission and implicit recognition of one’s own limitations since it refuses to be summoned by the faintest jingle of silver and gold. However, according to the discursive voice of Collins’ article, the publication of Mr Timbs’ book challenges this difficult pursuit. This small pocket manual is remarkably useful because of the way complex information is presented to the reader through short paragraphs covering all subjects imaginable from Domestic Manners to the Animal Kingdom to the Marvels of the Heavens. More importantly, the handy format of *Things Not Generally Known* makes it possible to be taken up one minute and put down the next—exactly what persons of distinction not blessed by knowledge need. Mr Timbs’ manual, as a tailor takes the job of doing someone’s clothes or a cook prepares the dinner, avoids the painful task of digging up information by oneself. *Things Not Generally Known* provides with an easy route to cultural improvement specially suited to a class, that of the *nouveau riche*, booming in the mid-century: “Handsome, engaging, perfectly dressed, comfortably rich, the one thing I want to complete me is to be well-informed, without the inconvenience of preliminary study” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 49). Truly, the amount of interesting facts contained in *Things Not Generally Known* makes the prospect of social intercourse much more attractive: “I can rush forthwith, by a short cut, into the reputation of a man of vast knowledge, and a talker of unlimited capacity. I can silence all men; I can astonish and captivate all women. Is there idle boasting? Certainly not. I have my inestimable pocket Manual of ready-made wisdom, to fit all minds” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 49). Reality, however, proved the disastrous outcome of such idle boasting.

The owner of Mr Timbs’ pocket manual intends to test his recently acquired knowledge during a dinner: “The Indian Mutiny, the Panic, the Leviathan, the New Parliament, the very weather, everything, in short, which is generally known, will be blown away from every mouth the instant I open my lips, and sow my Things Not Generally Known, broad-cast, among the company and the dishes, from the first course to the dessert” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 50). What it follows, however, is a delirious account of the ill-fated dinner spoiled by a farrago of cheap knowledge. Collins’ anonymous narrator refuses to eat fish on the grounds of being almost an act of cannibalism—since, as he informs to the astonished company, the great Demaillet affirmed the descendent of man from this species. When a

daughter tells her old mother not to hurry, the three motions of the earth are invoked to show how futile such request is: “Don’t be alarmed, ma’am, the sun and all the planets are rushing in our direction, and at our rate, and it is my private opinion than when we do come into collision with that star in the constellation Hercules, we shall probably smash it, and go again smoothly as if nothing had happened” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 50). Checking the endless resource that is Mr Timb’s manual, Collins’ well-informed gentleman is certainly making this dinner the most remarkable one in the whole of England. And the soirée that follows is equally unforgettable. The practical knowledge available in *Things Not Generally Known* affords an unmissable opportunity to impress the female beauties attending. For instance, “Page Forty One: Phenomena of Vision” offers the perfect instance of a Thing to catch a girl’s imagination: “‘I saw you looking sympathetically at your sister-flowers,’ I begin, in that soft, murmuring, mysterious tone of voice, which we ladies’ men so perpetually and so successfully use in all our communications with the fair sex; ‘and I longed to be one of them,—this scarlet geranium for instance. Do you know why I envy that little flower with all my heart?’” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 51). The flattered girl, ignorant of what lies in waiting, replies to the nonsense of her solicitor poking fun at his bold attitude. If he feels envy at all, she argues, it is because he is a selfish man who cannot endure the girl’s appreciation of the flower. Nothing farther from the truth, retorts this mine of information. The flower justly deserves his envy because “it has the happy, the priceless privilege of making your eyes undulate for hundred and eighty-two millions of times in a second” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 51) as it is carefully explained in page forty one of Mr Timbs’ pocket manual. On the face of this simple scientific fact, previous compliments received from other men turn sour. Lovely eyes like these, the girl is informed, have to undergo millions and millions of undulatory movements when they look at a violet tint: “Out of all these vibrations”, wonders this unstoppable talker, “might there not be one little one adventurous enough to stray from the eye to the heart? May I sacrifice all propriety by wearing a violet waistcoat, the next time we meet, and will you reward me for that outrage on good manners by looking at it, for one second? Not for my sake and in my name—ah, no, I dare not ask that!—but for the sake of Science” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 51-52). Mr Timbs’ *Things Not Generally Known* has certainly transformed this most ignorant man in a repository of knowledge ready to in-

struct an ignorant audience in the most elemental facts regardless of his utter ignorance of them. As it follows, the bore—the person, according to Collins, with “no ideas, no information, no flow of language, no tact, no power of ever saying the right word at the right time, even by chance” (“A Shockingly Rude Article” 242)—thived in mid-century society.¹⁵³

If the numbers on the title-page were to be trusted, sixteen thousand copies of *Things Not Generally Known* had been distributed by the time of publication of “Deep Design on Society”. According to Collins’ narrator, that meant an equal number of ignorant persons improving their knowledge with the purpose of distinguishing themselves in society: “It is more than likely that we may, some of us, meet round the same festive board, and jostle each other in a manner dreadful to think of” (“Deep Design on Society” 52). Better therefore to call upon those sixteen thousand brothers and sisters to prevent further damage. An arrangement should be made, perhaps a fair division of the pocket manual to avoid knowledge growing out of control: “If any one of the sixteenth thousand is going out to dinner on that day, I call upon him publicly to come forward, as I have publicly come forward in this paper, for the purpose of stating plainly what house he is going to, and how many Things Not Generally Known he means to use, and which they are” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). And the purpose of it? A better working arrangement for all the parts involved: “All I want is that we should be a united body, and that we should not interfere with each other” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). A bright future lays ahead in a society ruled by the utmost ignorance: “We have a sure game before us, if we only shuffle our cards properly” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). Displaying an extraordinary degree of mercenary intelligence, the sage converted to Mr Timbs’ religion of cheap knowledge suggests to be organised as other societies are—a new freemasonry of sorts: “Let us in the name of everything that is fraternal and fair and gen-

¹⁵³ As the narrator of “Deep Design on Society” makes clear, daily experience shows how bores fit much better than clever men into the world at large, enjoying a surprising degree of respect and popularity to the point that people “with an un-English appetite for perpetual variety, have combined to set up the bore as a species of bugbear to frighten themselves, and have rashly imagined that the large majority of their fellow-creatures could see clearly enough to look at the formidable creature with their eyes” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). But the large majority seems to have turned a blind eye: in fact, both men and women love to be bored. According to Collins’ narrator, people fill theatres and galleries, attend parties or follow political debates in the press because of their attachment to boredom. Even literary criticism is affected: the insurmountable dullness of heavy books obeys the strong desire of the public to be bored. Mid-century society is enthralled by boredom. Therefore, harsh judgments about the bore are quite inappropriate. He is after all “the only individual in this country who is sure of his position and safe with his public” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). Certainly not a small feat to achieve from the point of view of a professional of the pen as Collins was.

tlemanly, combine to enjoy the good-Things-Not-Generally-Known-of-this-world, share and share alike”, concludes the anonymous contributor. “If we can do that, and if we can only keep the rest of the public out, we are sure of making our reputations, and sure of keeping our hold of society as long as possible” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 52). It was indeed quite a remarkable plan of action for a man who had declared his complete ignorance of the most elemental facts previous to his pivotal encounter with Mr Timbs’ pocket manual. Collins, when writing “Deep Design on Society”, was following the very English tradition of satire, that is, of dressing up his displeasure with an (apparent) moral endorsement.¹⁵⁴ Nothing could displease him more than the debasement of knowledge promoted by manuals like that of Mr Timbs.

Collins’ “Deep Design in Society” has never elicited, as far as I know, a commentary from past and current academic criticism. It is a regrettable ignorance since this article, in my opinion, offers a fascinating insight upon the fragile cultural standing of those social newcomers who were joining the ranks of the middle class during the mid-century. To my mind, “Deep Design in Society” can be read as a follow-up to Collins’ *Basil* (1852), the product of a time when the jingle of silver and gold was available to more than the happy few. Purchasers of *Things Not Generally Known* were well acquainted with tasteful dinners, gentlemanly clothing and furnished apartments by the time of publication of Collins’ article. However, the pursuit of knowledge carried out by the anonymous narrator of “Deep Design in Society” proved of small utility when devoid of the most elementary aesthetic discrimination. It could be that, thanks to Mr Timbs’ manual, knowledge had “so to speak, come to its senses at last, and had learnt the necessity of offering himself on reasonably easy terms to all persons of distinction who might desire to possess it” (Collins, “Deep Design on Society” 49). But the outcome, as the aforementioned dinner shows, was a travesty of politeness and the most elementary rules of social intercourse. Collins, who laboured hard to produce commodity-texts of quality enough to be printed in a weekly journal edited by the foremost writer of the time, approached

¹⁵⁴ “Most satirists”, write Connery and Combe, “... *claim* one purpose for satire, that of high-minded and usually socially oriented moral and intellectual reform; however, they *engage* in something quite different, namely, a mercilessly savage attack on some person or thing that, frequently for private reasons, displeases them” (2).

knowledge far more reverently than those who craved for social recognition through fast learning. In an environment like that of the commercial mid-century, when the bore threatened to become a new normal type, knowledge was worth fighting for. Mr Sherwin’s living room in *Basil* (1852) plainly showed the aesthetic threat growing in suburbia. The newcomers who had greatly benefited from the increase in the division of labour and with enough leisure time at their disposal might well think of Mr Timbs’ pocket manual as a reliable source of information to succeed in the social game.¹⁵⁵ Collins perfectly knew what they were to make of it. *Things Not Generally Known* offered the chance of introducing oneself as a man of vast understanding without the necessary requirements of preliminary study. As Collins’ bore quite proudly remarks, “I have my inestimable pocket Manual of ready-made wisdom to fit all minds” (“Deep Design on Society” 49). Credit had to be given to its author, that “industrious person”, for putting together a book that saved the trouble of having to dig deep into the mine of knowledge, exactly in the very same manner that a cook saved a person of distinction from the trouble of having to prepare his own dinner. Mr Timbs’ stores of knowledge best suited the bore. From the marvels of the heavens to geographical discoveries, from the cost of the great pyramid of Egypt to the curious literary style of Herodotus, *Things Not Generally Known* afforded a wealth of cheap knowledge to those eager to improve their minds.¹⁵⁶ That it was ready-made wisdom for the tea-table, merely a digested version of the hundred books which required study and patience to be properly understood, most assuredly did not bother at all the likes of Mr Sherwin.

¹⁵⁵ Mr Timbs’ pocket manual was not an isolated occurrence. *Things Not Generally Known* formed part of a broader series that included *Popular Errors Explained and Illustrated. A Book for Old and Young* and *Curiosities of History, with New Lights. A Book for Old and Young*, both of them published under the head title of *Things Not Generally Known*. The former includes on the back of its cover a brief recollection of the general praise given by the press of the time to the first book of the series, the aforementioned Mr Timbs’ manual. According to *The Athenaeum*, “anyone who reads and remembers Mr Timbs’ encyclopaedic varieties should ever after be a good tea-table talker; for Mr Timbs has stored up in this little volume more knowledge than is to be found in a hundred books that might be named”, it can be read in the 1856 edition of the manual that I consulted at the British Library. *Punch*, with its characteristic jocular style, thinks of Mr Timbs’ work as “a remarkably pleasant and instructive little book; a book as full of information as a pomegranate is full of seed”. It can be argued that the information to get from *Things Not Generally Known* was as easily disposed of as the seeds of the pomegranate were.

¹⁵⁶ Quite interestingly, when consulting the edition of *Things Not Generally Known* held at the British Library, I found the entry “What is Pre-Raphaelitism?” of the chapter “Art-Terms” to be completely devoted to the original brotherhood dissolved in 1853,—as it should be—ignoring the practice of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris so commonly labelled as Pre-Raphaelite by current academic criticism. In the short account given, Ruskin is presented as the champion of the movement.

By the closing of the mid-century at least sixteen thousand ignorant people had discovered that Knowledge could be summoned at five minute's notice when money was put upon the counter. What use they made of it was, from Collins' point of view, staggering. "Deep Design in Society", I think, can be approached as a foil to the more optimistic "To Think, or Be Thought For?" (1856). The confidence in the general public that prevailed in the latter did not reach the former. Collins was truly shocked by an audience eager to consume the bits and pieces of information presented by a pocket manual and to behave as if they were masters of true knowledge—and, consequently, entitled to their own aesthetic criteria. He had good reasons to be so. The sheer conceit displayed by the many Mr Sherwins climbing the social ladder—the "newly literate working-class audiences" (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89)—only accentuated as time went by the Art Treasures Exhibition catered to them, and so it did the South Kensington Museum. Perhaps for that very same reason Collins turned his attention to a huge, unfathomable audience lurking in the shadows of literary respectability. This very particular readership, traditionally ignored by highbrow criticism, was nonetheless a force to be reckoned with. Collins even thought that the future of English literature might well rely on it. Reason enough to devote a whole article to deal with the readers of the penny journals.

5.3 THAT UNBOUND PICTURE QUARTO

Less than a year after the closure of the Manchester Exhibition in October 1857, Collins' "The Unknown Public" (1858) made front page in *Household Words*. Published unsigned as customary, this article can be considered, I think, as a follow-up to Collins' "To Think, or Be Thought Of" (1856). However, instead of exposing the pernicious effects of having an elite in control of the pictorial taste of the nation, on this occasion Collins turned his attention to the lowest social strata of the country. It was sheer madness, he argued, to think of the readership of middle class magazines as the first and foremost bulk of readers in England: "Do the subscribers to this journal", Collins wondered, "the customers at the eminent publishing-houses, the members of book-clubs and circulating libraries, and the purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews, compose altogether the great bulk of the reading public of

England?” (“The Unknown Public” 217). There was a time when even Collins would have answered in the affirmative. But things had changed of late: “I know better now. I know that the public just now mentioned, viewed as an audience for literature, is nothing more than a minority” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 217). Of course, it was not a sudden revelation but a slow discovery that took time to happen. In his ramblings through London’s poorest neighbourhoods, Collins could not avoid noticing in the windows of stationers and tobacco’s shops certain publications of small quarto size with a picture on the upper half of the front leaf and a tiny quantity of small type under it. To Collins’ ill-concealed astonishment, “none of the gentlemen who are so good as to guide my taste in literary matters, had ever directed my attention towards these mysterious publications” (“The Unknown Public” 217). The complaint, bearing in mind his previous article, was far from unintentional. Two years before Collins had launched a lambasting attack upon those gentlemen considerate enough to guide the taste of the nation in pictorial matters. Now, even when his object of interest had shifted, he could not bypass the opportunity to notice how a similar situation also applied to literature. Of course, Collins was not surprised at all by the lack of interest of the arbiters of taste in the small quarto size publications. It was difficult to imagine that kind of men rambling through the most degraded areas of the capital, away from the security afforded by their ivory towers. Taste in literature, as taste in painting, was a reflection of the social situation of the country. Collins’ favourite review, for instance, was completely ignorant of the existence of these mysterious publications. The same could be said of the enterprising librarian who provided him with dozens of uninteresting books but never “with the limp unbound picture quarto of the small shops” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 217) so easy to spot in second and third rate neighbourhoods. And not only there. Travelling around the country, Collins found to his astonishment the unbound picture quarto in the most unpredictable places: “I saw them in fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops”, he recollected. “Villages even—picturesque, strong-smelling villages—were not free from them” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 217). It was inevitable, therefore, to link this widespread diffusion of cheap literature with the penetration of capitalism in the remotest corners of the country:

Wherever the speculative daring of one man could open a shop, and the human appetites and necessities of his fellow mortals could keep it from shutting up again, there, as it appeared to me, the unbound picture quarto instantly entered, set itself up obtrusively in the window, and insisted on being looked at by everybody. ‘Buy me, borrow me, stare at me, steal me—do anything, O inattentive stranger, except contemptuously pass me by’. (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 217)

As the commodities on display in *Basil*’s suburban villa glared upon its eponymous hero, so the small quarto publications did upon Collins—a sort of *frisson* was produced upon the viewer by these printed pages.¹⁵⁷ Collins explicitly referred to a sort of strange compulsion that forced him to stop in front of shop-windows to contemplate these “all-pervading specimens of what was to me a new species of literary production” (“The Unknown Public” 217). And it was a production seemingly inexhaustible judging by Collins’ own experience.¹⁵⁸ From the deserts of Cornwall to the populous Whitechapel area of East London, the small quarto publication ruled undisputed. Even in the remotest valley of Wales still unknown to the railway this new literary specimen could be found: “Who could resist this perpetual, this inevitable, this magnificently unlimited appeal to notice and patronage?” Certainly not Collins:

From looking in at the windows of the shops, I got on to entertaining the shops themselves, to buying specimens of this locus-fight of small publications, to making strict examination of them from the first page to the last, and finally, to instituting enquires about them in all sorts of well-informed quarters. The result—the astonishing result—has been the discovery of an Unknown Public; a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious,

¹⁵⁷ “The penny fiction weeklies of the 1840s and 50s largely maintained the format pioneered in the 1820s”, writes Andrew King, “though the position and size of the internal illustrations stabilised to enable them to be used in shop windows as advertisements, and sixteen pages of triple columns became the norm” (187).

¹⁵⁸ The unbound picture quarto flourished during the 1850s. As Graham Law noted, the mid-century was a period “of rapid expansion for the periodical press, in large part because of the gradual removal of the fiscal constraints known to their radical enemies as the ‘taxes on knowledge’, the main steps being the abolition by Parliament of the advertisement duty in 1853, the newspaper stamp in 1855, and the paper tax in 1861” (“Wilkie Collins and the Discovery of an ‘Unknown Public’” 328).

the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel Journals. (“The Unknown Public” 217)

The penny journal was indeed a very particular literary commodity of its own. A small publication of quarto size, it consisted “merely of a few unbound pages ... filled up with miscellaneous contributions, in literature and art, drawn from every conceivable source” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 217- 221). Mixing fiction and illustration, it soon became a favourite literary commodity of a growing working class besieged by poverty. As Trollope put it, “[t]he public finding that so much might be had for a shilling, in which a portion of one or more novels was always included, were unwilling to spend their money on the novel alone” (273). Literature, regardless of its quality, was undergoing a process of dramatic commodification in the decades previous to the mid-century. Collins’ notice of the “magnificently unlimited appeal” of the small quarto shows how patronage of the printed word had evolved from an elitist system completely dependent upon the upper classes to be reliant on a much wider public to be counted by the millions. And this was a public, Collins argued, completely different from what had been seen before. Not even the middle class readership of *Household Worlds* could compare with this seemingly unfathomable audience, truly the *raison d’être* for the impressive market of penny-novel journals.¹⁵⁹ The success of the format, needless to say, happened over time: the oldest of the most successful five penny journals in circulation spotted by Collins was launched fifteen years previous to the publication of “The Unknown Public”.¹⁶⁰ However, common characteristics applied to all the pennies under review: the same cheap price, the same kind of weekly publication and roughly the same quantity of con-

¹⁵⁹ Not to be confused with the penny newspaper. Collins used this “awkward compound word in order to mark the distinction between a penny journal and a penny newspaper” which “is an entirely different subject, with which this article has no connection” (“The Unknown Public” 217). According to Michael Anglo, in his *Penny Dreadfuls and Other Victorian Horrors* (1977), the “penny dreadful” could encompass either penny magazines or the serials published in them as well as novels priced at one penny.

¹⁶⁰ The first penny journal credited as such was Charles Knight’s *Penny Magazine* (1832), produced by the Brougham’s Society for the Distribution of Useful Knowledge and whose cheap price soon earned him quite large circulation sales. See Leavis (173-174) and Schwarzbach (233) for more information. However, Q. D. Leavis provides an alternative account for the birth of the penny journal. According to her, Pierce Egan’s *Tom and Jerry*, which “swept the town in 1821” can be credited as being the very first penny (152). The cheap price was also very appealing, because “a penny ... was the standard price instead of the shilling charged for an instalment of middle-class reading matter” (Altick, *The English Common Reader* 291).

tent. Digging a bit deeper into the subject, Collins thought of the weekly circulation of the oldest journal to be around half a million. Supposing the circulation of the other four around another half, the final sale of the five small quartos could well be estimated around a million weekly: “Reckoning only three readers to each copy sold”, Collins argued, “the result is *a public of three millions*—a public unknown to the literary world; unknown, as disciples, to the whole body of professed critics; unknown, as customers, at the great libraries and the great publishing-houses, unknown, as an audience, to the distinguished English writers of our own time” (“The Unknown Public” 218). Half mockingly, half seriously, Collins was puzzled by the existence of a reading public of that size inhabiting on the fringes of literary respectability. It was not only an extraordinary phenomenon, but “a mystery which the sharpest man among us may not find it easy to solve” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 218).¹⁶¹ He might not have been such a man, but Collins, to his credit, decided to embark in a quest to solve the riddle.

The known reading public was indeed a varied one. There was the public only interested in religious subjects with a market of their own. Then there were the readers who craved for information, devoting themselves to a wide range of subjects from history to travels. Another different public read for amusement only, *patronising*, as Collins wrote, the circulating libraries and the railway book-stalls. Finally, there were also those only concerned with newspapers. Overall, the known reading public was easy to notice: “We know, if we are at all conversant with literary matters”, Collins argued, “even the very districts of London in which certain classes of people live who are to be depended upon beforehand as the picked readers for certain kinds of books” (“The Unknown Public” 218). Theirs was a very particular urban geography limited to certain areas of the capital, not extending to the East End of London or a remote West Cornwall village. People conversant on literary matters knew absolutely nothing about “the enormous outlawed majority” that Collins with justice termed as “the lost literary tribes” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 218). Expanding his research to his close acquaintances, dear friends and bitter enemies included, Collins was staggered by the invisible

¹⁶¹ The Public Libraries Act of 1850, encouraging councils to set up free libraries, meant a recognition of the growing importance of this public unknown to the literary world.

barrier that kept the penny journal away from the known reading public: "I have heard theories started as to the probable existence of penny novel-journals in kitchen dressers, in the back parlours of Easy Shaving Shops, in the greasy seclusion of the boxes at the small Chop Houses", he wrote. "But I have never yet met with any man, woman, or child who could answer the inquiry, 'Do you subscribe to a penny journal?' plainly in the affirmative, and who could produce the periodical in question" ("The Unknown Public" 218). The consumption of literature echoed the heavy stratification of mid-nineteenth century society: the penny journal was as mysterious a publication as its readers were to the minority that formed the great bulk of the recognised reading public. Even Collins' research on the subject was heavily biased, hoping to arrive by what he called "a circuitous road" to a conclusion that, if not satisfactory, at least would prove safe enough to sustain his argument. Lacking any positive information on "the lost literary tribes" he found himself forced to compromise, "accepting such negative evidence as may help us to guess with more or less accuracy, at the social position, the habits, the tastes, and the average intelligence of the Unknown Public" (Collins, "The Unknown Public" 218). A man bold enough to ramble through Whitechapel, arguably the most dangerous area of mid-Victorian London, would have found courage enough to ask a few questions to the purchasers of the penny journals about their habits and tastes. But Collins remained quite comfortably distant from the outlawed majority. One needed to keep a cautionary distance from barbarous tribes. They were still to be civilised.

Because the unknown public of the penny journals favoured amusement rather than information, the long serial with convoluted plots soon became a staple of this literary commodity. Collins, trying to understand the reasons for the success of the penny journal, asked its sellers for some help. He wanted to know which penny was the most successful and the reasons why. But he found none. Being all of them good pennies, the sellers retorted, each customer chose them according to their particular tastes. Luckily for Collins, the same pennies provided him with an important source of information: the Answers to Correspondents, arguably the most interesting section of the journals. Protected by the shield of anonymity, there the readers laid bare their innermost concerns and desires completely unaware of any sense of ridicule or shame: "There is no earthly subject that it is possible to discuss, no private affair that is possible to conceive, which the amazing Unknown Public will not confide

to the Editor in the form of a question, and which the still more amazing editor will not set himself seriously and resolutely to answer” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 219). Ladies concerned by their ageing asked the editor, gentlemen wishing to know the best method to dye their hair asked the editor, even young girls in the prime of their youth beset the editor with questions that not even to their mothers would confide: “Inconceivable dense ignorance, inconceivable petty malice, and inconceivable complacent vanity, all consult the editor, and all, wonderful to relate, get serious answers from him” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 218). A most remarkable man is this editor who passes from assuming the character of a father to an authority in cookery in the blink of an eye. Truly, the Answers to Correspondents provided an extraordinary source of material to understand the character of the unknown public—or, as Collins put it, to test the general amount of education they had acquired of late. Browsing five different journals bought at random allowed Collins to present a fairly accurate portrait of their readership. Accurate, but far from flattering. One reader wanted a receipt for gingerbread. Another wished to know what an Esquire was. A reader asked for the meaning of chiaroscuro. Another was unsure about what a poem meant. A reader needed some clarification on the difference between ancient and modern histories. A woman wrote to scold the gentlemen in her neighbourhood for not taking the ladies out. And, perhaps the epitome of nonsense, a reader who asked for the weight of his newborn child. Hard to believe as it was, nothing of this claptrap was made up: “I must promise”, Collins wrote, “that I have not maliciously hunted them up out of many numbers ... I have not waited for bad specimens, or anxiously watched for good: I have impartially taken my chance” (“The Unknown Public” 219). Collins clearly found the whole thing quite hilarious: a whole page of *Household Words* was devoted to this extraordinary selection of questions by the readers of the penny journals. Indeed, there was little to be said: “The sample produced of the three millions penny readers is left to speak for itself”, Collins sentenced, “to give some idea of the social and intellectual materials of which a portion, at least, of the Unknown Public may fairly be presumed to be composed” (“The Unknown Public” 220). Collins, as he repeatedly insisted upon, merely

transcribed what he had read no matter how preposterous it was. Little more could be said on the matter.¹⁶²

The penny journal was a miscellaneous literary commodity. Looking at the five journals by his side, Collins spotted ten serial stories, one reprint of a famous novel and seven short tales conclusive in one number. In addition, the remaining pages covered every imaginable subject: remarks from Plato, wood-engravings of famous people and places taken from other publications, poetry, riddles, cookery recipes and small amounts of general information. However, the serial story was the main attraction of the penny, the very first article to open the journal and always accompanied by a wood-engraving illustration. It was also characterised by a complete lack of originality that made all the serials look the same no matter their different authorship. This uniformity was reinforced by the constant use of shared features:

A combination of fierce melodrama and meek domestic sentiment; short dialogues and paragraphs on the French pattern, with moral English reflections of the sort that occur on the top lines of children’s copy-books; incidents and characters taken from the old exhausted mines of the circulating library, and presented as complacently and confidently as if they were original ideas; descriptions and reflections for the beginning of the number, and a “strong situation,” dragged in by the neck and shoulders, for the end—formed the literary sources from which the five authors drew their weekly supply. (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 221)

And they were also the features key to the success of Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) when serialised in *Household Words*. Sentimentality combined with melodrama, short dialogues to propel the action or the use of “curtains” to keep the reader waiting until the next instalment characterised the new (or not so new) literary genre later to be known as sensation fiction. Collins, as far as I know, never acknowledged any influence of penny litera-

¹⁶² “We have all of us formed some opinion by this time on the subject of the Public itself” (Collins, “The Unknown Public 221).

ture upon his writing.¹⁶³ However, to my mind, there is no question that *The Woman in White*, published a year after “The Unknown Public”, is a bold—and quite successful—attempt to adapt the “smoothest and flattest conventionality” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 221) of the cheap serial to a middle class readership. That conventionality, in fact, as it was presented by the penny journal, proved unendurable enough to Collins: “After reading my samples of these stories, I understood why it was that the fictions of the regularly-established writers for the penny journals were never republished”, he asserted. “There is, I honestly believe, no man, woman, or child in England, not a member of the Unknown Public, who could be got to read them. The one thing which it is possible to advance in their favour is, that there is apparently no wickedness in them” (“The Unknown Public” 221). Maybe Collins picked the wrong small quartos, or maybe he took for granted prevailing misconceptions, but the penny journal was far from being an innocent pamphlet to amuse the popular classes. Be that as it may, the absolute lack of quality of penny fiction was beyond dispute: “If I had found the smallest promise in the style, in the dialogue, in the presentation of character, in the arrangement of incident, in any of the five specimens of cheap fiction before me, each one of which extended, on the average, to ten columns of small print, I should have gone on gladly and hopefully to the next number” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 221). However, that not being the case, Collins did not even bother about the next instalment.¹⁶⁴ Beyond its very specific market, that of the unknown public, the literature of the penny journal simply did not stand a chance. Which maybe explains Collins’ reluctance to admit any indebtedness to it.

The success of the penny serial truly astonished Collins. Only a “monster audience”, he argued, could respond positively to such atrocious writing with little regard left for true

¹⁶³ As Lyn Pykett pointed out, the roots of the sensation novels that followed the publication of Collins’ *The Woman in White* “lie in a wide range of popular forms such as the Gothic novel, which flourished at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Newgate tales of crime and criminals, penny magazines, broadsheet street literature, stage melodrama and sensational journalism” (*The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* 12).

¹⁶⁴ “If it be objected that that I am condemning these stories after having merely read one number of each of them, I have only to ask in return, whether anybody ever waits to go all through a novel before passing an opinion on the goodness or the badness of it? In the latter case, we throw the story down before we get through it, and that is its condemnation” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 221).

craftsmanship.¹⁶⁵ Actually, they had been doing so for a long time as the success of *The Posthumorous Notes of the Pickwick Club* (1837-39) shows. Written by “Bos”, presumably Thomas Peckett Prest, this unauthorised penny adaptation of Dickens’ hugely popular *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) quite proudly proclaimed his popular nature: “Upon the appearance of those Shilling Publications which have been productive of so much mirth and amusement, it occurred to us that while the wealthier classes had their Momus, the poor man should not be debarred from possessing to himself as lively a source of entertainment and at a price consistent with his means” (qtd. in L. James 50). Inevitably, such an appeal to affordable entertainment conveyed a thorough debasement of Dickens’ craftsmanship to better suit the peculiar tastes of the poor man. Eventually, *The Posthumorous Notes of the Pickwick Club* was a source of entertainment whose literary quality matched its price—a rather unintended effect of capitalist development upon the consumption of literature.

The Unknown Public had clearly a story of its own previous to Collins’ discovery. This was a readership fond of a very particular kind of fiction and not keen to compromise. In this sense, the failure of Alexandre Dumas père was a case in point. Hoping to achieve a great success with *The Count of Monte Christo* (1844-45), a former proprietor of penny journals commissioned a translation of Dumas’ serial for his periodical. It did not go well, with serialisation flopping after the first instalments. Two other famously French novels, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43) and *Le Juif errant* (1844-45), both by Eugène Sue, went also scarcely noticed by the public. Even a new novel by Dumas, written on purpose to be translated into English, failed to attract the interest of the penny readership. As Collins reflected, “the inscrutable Unknown Public held back the hand of welcome from the spoilt child of a whole

¹⁶⁵ The concluding paragraphs of Thomas Peckett Prest’s *Ela, the Outcast* (1841), arguably one of the most successful penny novels in the 1840s, are a compendium of the kind of (bad) craft from which Collins recoiled in earnest: “Ela lived many years afterwards, and to become the grandmother of a numerous family, emulating the virtues of their parents who were revered by all who knew them. Mr and Mrs Wallingford lived in the enjoyment of every domestic happiness, and to behold their children’s children around them, possessed of all those intrinsic qualities that ennoble mankind, and is the only true source of earthly joy. Finis” (827).

world of novel-readers” (“The Unknown Public” 222).¹⁶⁶ The surprising failure of Dumas *père* amongst the penny journal readers could be attributed to their rigid moral sense, ill at ease with the *diableries* of the French author. However, as Collins was quick to argue, if the Answers to Correspondents showed anything at all was the dubious morality of the unknown public. A better clue was provided by the experience of Charles Reade, a close friend of Collins and arguably the only writer of a certain literary standing who had published a novel in a penny journal: “No shadow of a moral objection has ever been urged by any readers against the works published by the author of *It Is Never Too Late To Mend*; but even he, unless I have been greatly misinformed, failed to make the impression that had been anticipated on the impenetrable Three Millions” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222). Of course, Collins was shamelessly lying. Reade had been strongly criticised by his recurrence to crime and violence to foster the sales of his books to the point that circulating libraries even refused to distribute his novels. The unfathomable readership of the penny journal might seem the perfect public for such kind of fiction, but Reade’s serial was a failure. However, his success with the same literary commodity—*White Lies* (1857)—amongst a completely different audience was further proof of the impenetrability of the three million public. It was a success, Collins pointed out, “not obtained in its original serial form, but in its republished form, when it appealed from the Unknown to the Known Public” dismissing in this way moral concerns as “the obstacle which militated against the success of Alexandre Dumas and Eugène Sue” (“The Unknown Public” 222). One can argue that French fiction faced an educational and cultural gap amongst the unknown public, not a moral one. Reade’s change of fortune clearly impressed Collins who had just serialised *The Dead Secret* (1856) in *Household*

¹⁶⁶ Quite interestingly, Collins’ “The Unknown Public” was soon followed by another reflection on cheap literature in *Household Words*. Dixon’s “Literary Small Change” dealt with the recent innovations of the French market of books pointing out the immense success of “*Les Cinq Centimes Illustrés*”—roughly translated by the journalist as “The Illustrated Halfpenny”: “It was so cheap, that it was not worth the pain of going without it. It pervaded the land, like the frogs of Egypt, appearing in out-of-the-way places, nobody knew whence or how” (405). This folded sheet was such a big hit that prompted an extraordinary surge of cheap periodicals throughout the whole of France: “The grand fact remains unshaken”, pointed out the anonymous writer, “that an unknown market for, and an unthought-of means of getting read, printed paper, has been very recently discovered” (Dixon 405). But little resemblance had this market with the English one. From the outset, the French cheap periodicals were supported by a cultured middle-class readership not being “the foster-children of an unknown public, like the corresponding publications in England” (Dixon 405-406). A later mention of the lack of Notices to Correspondents in the cheap journals of the neighbouring country suggests that the article was intended as a sort of follow-up to Collins’ “The Unknown Public”.

Words. Literary success in mid-century England seemed frighteningly dependent upon a very specific readership. For men like Collins, the known public still reigned supreme.

In truth, the unknown public, as Collins wrote, was “in a literary sense, hardly beginning, as yet, to learn to read” (“The Unknown Public” 222). A deep social divide kept this readership aloof from the middle-class audience of journals like *Household Words*. The readers of the penny journals, Collins further elaborated, were “evidently, in the mass, from no fault of theirs, still ignorant of almost everything which is generally known and understood among readers whom circumstances have placed, socially and intellectually, in the rank above them” (“The Unknown Public” 222). Against a serial full of references to foreign names and customs as *The Count of Monte Christo*—or even Reade’s *White Lies* with its French setting—the unknown public was simply left blank. The educational gap, as Collins saw it, seemed insurmountable: “Look back at the answers to correspondents”, he wrote, “and then say, out of fifty subscribers to a penny journal, how many are likely to know, for example, that Mademoiselle means Miss?” (“The Unknown Public” 222). It was a question, as Collins well knew, that did not apply to the middle-class readership of Dickens’ magazine. Those who purchased *Household Words* on a weekly basis were completely accustomed to “the delicacies and subtleties of literary art” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222) in a way that the public of the penny journals were not. This was an immense readership who needed, in a literary sense, to learn how to read. Theirs was a taste in desperate need of attention. With this idea on mind it was quite natural for Collins to welcome the recent serialisation of Walter Scott’s *Kenilworth* (1821) in the pages of a penny journal. It was indeed an amazing anomaly to see the master of modern fiction sharing publication space with authors completely ignorant of the craft of writing. However, what could be expected from Scott’s appeal to this new kind of public none could tell. Were *Kenilworth* successful amongst this particular readership “then the very best men among living English writers will one of these days be called on, as a matter of necessity, to make their appearance in the pages of the penny journals” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222). But it was a call not to be made soon. The examples of Alexandre Dumas and Charles Reade showed how literary fame was of little use when dealing with the unknown public. As matters stood in 1858, the penny journal was thoroughly hostile to the very best writers of the time, its readership still ignorant of the dif-

ference between good and bad literature. Only time, Collins argued, could be trusted for the improvement of an audience that counted on the millions. The universal law of progress, he thought, was meant to have a salutary effect upon this unfathomable public eventually fostering discrimination: “When that period comes, the readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222). A bright prospect seemed to be in the making for the upcoming generation of English novelists whose forebears had been excluded from this unapproachable market: “To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public”, argued Collins in his closing remarks. “When that public shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known” (“The Unknown Public” 222). It was a need, however, not to be discovered in the present time.

“The Unknown Public” is important for several reasons. Already a professional of the pen by the time of its publication, Collins was naturally interested in the future evolution of the English market of books. To his astonishment, neither the subscribers of the circulating libraries nor the purchasers of *Household Words* had the faintest idea of this unknown public counting in the millions. The circulation of the penny journals, first launched in weekly numbers priced one penny and then reissued in monthly numbers priced sixpence, far surpassed that of well-established literary magazines. However, contrary to what Collins argued towards the end of his article, it was blatantly untrue that the penny journal had discovered a new kind of public. It was much more accurate to say that the existence of a public literate enough to read had prompted the emergence of the small quarto long ago as Thackeray, always an attentive observer, cunningly understood: “Pen looked at all the windows of all the shops: and the strange variety of literature which they exhibit”, he wrote in *History of Pendennis* (1848-1850), whose plot is set in the 1830s. “In this they were displayed black-letter volumes and books in the clear pale types of Aldus and Elzevir; in the next, you can see the ‘Penny Horrific Register,’ the ‘Halfpenny Annals of Crime,’ and ‘History of the most celebrated Murderers of all Countries,’ ‘The Raff’s Magazine,’ ‘The Lady Swell,’ and other publications of the penny press” (343). It might well be that *The Posthumorous Notes of the Pickwick*

Club (1837-39) was amongst them, one of the many cheap literary commodities made possible by the unstoppable capitalist mode of production. Enrich Auerbach, in *Mimesis* (1946), noticed how the writer had traditionally depended “on a princely patron or a definite aristocratic minority” (500) to support his craft. But, as the nineteenth century advanced, multiple opportunities opened for those wishing to make a living in the field of literature. The worst danger that any professional writer faced, as Auerbach noted, was indifference: had the public ignored his literary efforts, he (or she) was doomed to starvation. It was a plain truth reflected by the final paragraph of the volume edition of *The Mysteries of London* (1850), perhaps one of the most successful penny novels of the time: “The proprietor of the Work takes this opportunity of expressing his thanks to the Public for the continued patronage they have extended to the Series of Tales published under the above title” (Blanchard 416). Indeed, this was a kind of literary patronage dependent not on a rich individual, but on an amorphous mass called the Public. Whether unknown or known, nineteenth century literature was thoroughly shaped by it.

5.4 THE MARCH OF THE TIMES

In “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858), published a few months before his piece upon the readership of penny journals, Collins assumed the fictional persona of Mr Reader, “sufficiently well-educated, and sufficiently refined in my tastes and habits, to be a member of the large class of persons usually honoured by literary courtesy with the title of the Intelligent Public” (265). Collins’ career as a professional of the pen rested on the support of that very specific audience. Purchasing a weekly instalment of Dickens’ *Household Words*, or subscribing to a circulating library, the well-educated reading public allowed Collins to devote his life to literature and make a living of it. Were not for them, Collins’ literary career would have suffered a serious—and probably fatal—blow. However, as “The Unknown Public” made clear, this so-called Intelligent Public, large as it was, remained outnumbered by the readership of the penny journals, an audience with very particular requirements. The cunning publisher Edward Lloyd explained it succinctly to Thomas Frost: “Our publications circulate among a class so different in education and social position from the readers of the three-vol-

ume novels, that we sometimes distrust our judgment and place the manuscript in the hands of an illiterate person—a servant or a machine boy for instance. If they pronounce favourably upon it, we think it will do” (qtd. in Anglo 76). The consumption of literature reflected the heavy stratification of the social body of the country. Barely literate persons were thoroughly ignorant of the kind of literary commodities consumed by those above in the social ladder, exactly as the readers of three-volume novels knew nothing about the penny journal readership. The aforementioned Answers to Correspondents reproduced by Collins in “The Unknown Public” depicted a readership devoid of the most elemental knowledge, truly a class different in education and social position from that of Dickens’ magazine. Collins’ assertion of merely transcribing the content of the pennies in his possession was a necessary one to tackle the incredulity that the reader of *Household Words* must have felt when confronted with such an alien readership. Indeed, the public of penny journals was thoroughly an unknown one.

When perusing “The Unknown Public”, the East End of London emerges as exotic to the readers of Dickens’ magazine as the African jungle, with respectable people finding little appeal in the squalor of certain areas of the metropolis indeed a place of stark contrasts: “The condition of large sections of its inhabitants is wholly unknown to the majority of those above them in the social pyramid, the wide base of which is made up of poverty, ignorance, degradation, crime and misery” (Godwin 1). Newcomers who had left the countryside attracted by the opportunities of the capital filled the growing slums of London, bringing with them a complete ignorance of almost everything understood and known by the middle-class readership of Dickens’ magazine: “As for reading, sir, it’s all very well for me, who have been a keeper and dawdled about like a gentleman with a gun over my arm: but did you ever do a good’s day farm-work in your life? If you had, man or boy, you wouldn’t have been game for much reading when you got home; you’d do just what these poor fellows do”, argues the gamekeeper Paul Tregarva in Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* (1848). “Tumble into bed at eight o’clock, hardly waiting to take your clothes off, knowing that you must turn up again at five o’clock the next morning to get a breakfast of bread, and, perhaps, a dab of the squire’s dripping, and then back to work again; and so on, day after day, sir, week after week, year after

year” (196).¹⁶⁷ Such were the men and women who crowded the second and third rate neighbourhoods of the capital where the unbound picture quartos noticed by Collins reigned supreme. Kingsley’s gamekeeper had shifted the work in the fields for that of factories as thousands of others did: “All vitality”, as Ruskin pointed out it, “is concentrated through those throbbing arteries [the railroads] into central cities” (*Selected Writings* 27). The social body was changing to an incredible pace during the mid-century, radically transforming the urban geography of the country: “Ah, it’s a sort of lost corner, this place”, says a character of Collins’ *The Woman in White*. “Not like London—is it, sir? Bless you, we are all asleep here! We don’t march with the times” (508). Indeed, the times were marching at a remarkable speed, the physiognomy of the metropolis radically altered in a few decades: “Baregrove Square was the farthest square from the city, and the nearest to the country, of any then existing in the north-west suburb of London”, writes the narrator of *Hide and Seek* about the year 1837. However, by the mid-century such was no longer the case:

But, by the time fourteen years more had elapsed—that is to say, in the year 1851—Baregrove Square had lost its distinctive character altogether; other squares had filched from it those last remnants of healthy rustic flavour from which its good name had been derived; other streets, crescents, rows, and villa-residents had forced themselves pitilessly between the old suburb and the country, and had suspended for ever the once neighbourly relations between the pavement of Baregrove Square and the pathways of the pleasant fields. (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 15)

The London known by Collins in the early 1850s had been changed beyond recognition. With good reason Ruskin complained of the multitudes “sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line” (*Selected Writings* 42). Inhabiting his self-created world of mediaeval chivalry, Ruskin naturally rebelled against the bleak landscape of an industrial England whose cities were devouring innocent farmers in search of a better living. True, strength was no longer wasted labouring in the fields but that did not mean better living conditions for the

¹⁶⁷ Kingsley’s novel, having as subtitle *A Problem*, dealt with the living conditions of the lower classes in the country shires still relatively unaffected by the spread of industrialism. It was sheer madness, he argued, to expect any literacy at all from a class condemned to work long days of exhausting physical labour. Moving to the sprawling urban centres of the country did not necessarily improve things.

costermongers, nightmen, chimney-sweeps and other poor people surviving in the slums of the metropolis as portrayed by George Godwin in *London Shadows* (1854). However, factory work, with the inevitable concentration of people in a single place, also allowed for an increase in literacy that greatly benefited from new methods of typesetting, machine-manufactured paper and rotary steam press. A rough command of reading was all that the public counting on the millions required to enjoy the long-running serials of the pennies and evade for a while from the daily miseries of working life. Not surprisingly, a whole bunch of “get rich quick” publishers like Edward Lloyd were more than eager to supply the masses with cheap literature plundering Gothic tales, plagiarising well known novels or simply filling a few pages with the cheap literary commodity of hard-up writers. They greatly benefited from the cheapening of paper and mechanical innovations that transformed the consumption of reading matter.¹⁶⁸ As John Chapman wrote in his clever analysis of the English market of books, “the poorer classes ... have not pounds nor even shillings, but only pence wherewithal to procure mental food” (4). It was a blatant truth that reached the 1870s when Collins, discussing the publication terms of *Man and Wife*, alluded to the cheap weeklies as these literary commodities which “are not read by people who subscribe to libraries” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 2: 187). They were indeed a very particular kind of mental food, but one of indisputable success.

By the time of publication of “The Unknown Public” (1858), Collins’ reputation in the field of letters was well established. In fact, he had achieved the no small feat of having recognised the authorship of *The Dead Secret* (1856) in the pages of *Household Words* contrary to the magazine’s customary policy of anonymity.¹⁶⁹ Collins was perfectly aware of his indebtedness towards a growing class of urban professionals with no trace of aristocratic lineages and

¹⁶⁸ Although more positive views of this historical process were also given. Morley’s article “Men Made by Machinery” (1857), with its praise of the benefits brought out by the use of machinery, made front-page news when published in *Household Words*.

¹⁶⁹ However, Collins’ triumph was relative, his authorship being “acknowledged in riders to the periodical, although not in the serialised instalments themselves” (Nayder 33). According to Anne Lohrli, thirteen advertisements of *The Dead Secret* with the line “By Wilkie Collins” appeared in *Household Words*, the novel being announced as a 2-vol. Bradbury & Evans publication. Interestingly, only two others books were advertised in this manner: *A Child’s History of England* and *Hard Times*, both of Dickens’ authorship. See Lohrli 234-235.

wealthy enough to purchase the latest issue of Dickens’ literary commodity. His was a readership thoroughly opposite to the public ignorant “of almost everything which is generally known and understood among readers whom circumstances have placed, socially and intellectually, in the rank above them” (Collins, “The Unknown Public” 222). The audience of *Household Words* was the antithesis of that of the penny journal. However, aware as Collins was of his reading public, Dickens made sure of keeping his friend and employee under certain bounds, warning W. H. Wills, his second in charge at *Household Words*, “not to leave anything in it [apropos “The Unknown Public”] that may be sweeping, and unnecessarily offensive to the middle class” since Collins “has always a tendency to overdo that—and such a subject gives him a fresh temptation” (qtd. in Peters 186). Dickens, always the astute businessman, well knew how much he and his staff were reliant in the middle class to risk a commercial fallout. Society, as Thackeray put it, did not want the Natural in novel writing.¹⁷⁰ As matters stood in the mid-century, there was much need of publishers like the one mentioned in Collins’ “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858), one who “can understand that there are people among his customers who possess cultivated tastes, and can cater for them accordingly, when they ask for something new” (266). And also who understood how dangerous was for writers to vent their frustrations without given due consideration to his customers’ mores. Arguably, it was an understanding that Dickens possessed in abundance and that apparently eluded Collins once in a while. The former well knew that an educated readership did not entail carte blanche to vent his frustrations. However, no matter how deep ran Collins’ discomfort with his middle-class readership, eventually he always accommodated—no doubt forced by the limited extent of his options as a professional of the pen. It might well be that the universal law of progress, as Collins thought, sooner or later was to reach the gigantic audience of the penny journals creating a readership of endless possibilities for new generations of English novelists. But that change was not bound to happen soon. Little could be done for now except to marvel at the seemingly unstoppable consumption of badly written fiction by a reading audience on the fringes of literary society.

¹⁷⁰ See *Pendennis* 34.

Collins, well acquainted with the pitiful state of the English stage, most probably was surprised only to a certain extent. The illiterate classes, he argued, made of mid-century theatre “the house call where the ignorance of the country assembles in high force, where the intelligence of the country is miserably represented by a minority that is not worth counting” (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 266).¹⁷¹ Literature, or at least serious literature, worked the opposite way, being the natural terrain of those with cultivated tastes: “The fast young farmer has his dramatists, just as he has his novelist in the penny journals. We, on our side, have got our great novelists (whose works the fast young farmer does *not* read)—why, I ask again, are we not to have our great dramatists as well?” (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 266). Prophetic words indeed for a man who was to earn a great success as a dramatist and a spectacular—and quite brutal—failure. Bearing in mind the desolate aesthetic landscape of suburbia depicted in “The Picture-Galleries of England” (1851) and *Basil* (1852), it might be argued that Collins’ hopes for a future aesthetic improvement of the unknown public were mere wishful thinking, a kind of joke intended to be shared with the middle-class readership of *Household Words*—a readership, it is worth bearing in mind, that he felt as his own no matter how much he teased it. As Collins had sided in the past with the public suffering the disastrous purchasing policy of the National Gallery, so he did now with the intelligent theatrical minority. The dictates of the populace, Collins firmly believed, were ruining the English stage:

If you want to find out who the people are who know nothing whatever, even by hearsay, of the progress of the literature of their own time—who have caught no chance vestige of any one of the ideas which are floating about before their very eyes—who are, to all social intents and purposes, as far behind the age they live in, as any people out of a lunatic asylum can be—go to a theatre, and be very careful, in doing so, to pick out the most popular performance of the day. (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 269)

¹⁷¹ Collins’ bleak view gained momentum in the last quarter of the century and proved fundamental in the creation of the National Theatre. See Minihan 142-144.

Theirs was an ignorance all the more welcomed by the theatrical manager: “Let him cast what garbage he pleases before them, the unquestionable mouths of his audience open, and snap at it” (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 269).¹⁷² Only an audience thoroughly ignorant of the most elemental knowledge could appreciate such a low quality drama. Such a lack of criteria defied belief, baffling a man so fond of the stage as Collins was. Inevitably, when reading “Dramatic Grub Street”, one wonders how much condescension tinges Collins’ confidence in the future amelioration of the intellectual capabilities of the lower classes. Dickens, for that matter, expressed in private his reservations concerning the English audience: “From our lofty heights”, he wrote to Collins after the conclusion of *The Dead Secret* (1856) in *Household Words*, “let us look down on the toiling masses with mild complacency—with gentle pity—with dove benignity” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 8: 329). No doubt Dickens’ ivory tower proved quite a comfortable place from where to look down. Some of that mild complacency may be spotted in Collins when dealing with his beloved English stage, although there is good reason to suspect that, regardless of the inevitable mid-Victorian class bias, his was an interest in the toiling masses heartily felt. The very same reason that Collins gave in his *My Miscellanies* (1863) for the publication of “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), that of speaking his mind on an important subject, applied to “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858). As Collins recollected, both articles provoked a fair share of controversy when issued in *Household Words*, he being blamed “for letting out the truth about the Drama” even though his views were shared “by readers with no professional interest in theatres” (*My Miscellanies* 193)—as they were shared, in what concerned freedom of thought in the Fine Arts, by those with no vested interests in old painting. The blame, however, had not changed Collins’ convictions in the past and was not changing them now. He persisted in thinking of great importance the two objects which had prompted the writing of his articles: “Freedom of inquiry into the debased condition of the English Theatre and freedom of thought on the subject of the Fine Arts” (*My Miscellanies* 193). It was a declaration of intentions all the more

¹⁷² “I am sorry and ashamed to write in this manner of any assemblage of my own countrymen; but a large experience of theatres forces me to confess that I am writing the truth” (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 269). As literature had an unknown public, so the theatre did. Cheap theatres, known as “dukeys”, were a common feature of the low life in the capital during the first decades of the nineteenth century. A penny was the price of admission to enjoy a wide variety of popular entertainment. However, following Quennell’s account, this cheap theatre began to disappear towards the mid-century. See Quennell 87.

important for being done in 1863 when Collins' fame equalled that of Dickens after the enormous success of *The Woman in White* (1859-1860). Both "To Think, or Be Thought For?" and "Dramatic Grub Street", published duly unsigned in *Household Words*, now bore the name of their author well printed under the title *My Miscellanies*. As he had steadily held to his own convictions in the past regardless of harsh criticism, so Collins was holding now when his name was widely known. One suspects that the lofty heights inhabited by his former editor were not enticing enough to look down on the toiling masses with dove benignity.

Collins' "The Unknown Public" (1858), dealing with a subject scarcely touched by literary criticism, is a remarkable piece of cultural analysis on its own. Only Thackeray, so far as I know, wrote another article in a similar vein. In "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge" (1838), written at the very first stages of his literary career, Thackeray found in the remission of the stamp laws the reason for the extraordinary success of the penny journal—quite interestingly considered by some Radical reviewers as an unintended result of the "March of the Intellect".¹⁷³ As Thackeray pointed out, little knew the well-educated reader about this enormous literary market formed by people "of quite a different condition" ("Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge" 280). The readers of *Fraser's Magazine*, where Thackeray's article was published, were quite ignorant about the millions devoted to the consumption of cheap fiction: "An English gentleman", Thackeray wrote, "knows as much about the people of Lapland or California as he does of the aborigines of The Seven Dials or the natives of Wapping" ("Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge" 280).¹⁷⁴ These aborigines, however, were the main readers of the penny journals that caught Thackeray's atten-

¹⁷³ As for the so-called "taxes on knowledge", Raymond Chapman writes: "There was a duty on paper, and a stamp-tax had been bought for all periodicals costing less than sixpence. This two-edged weapon—for it penalised cheap paper and put the others beyond the reach of the poor—was one of the repressive Six Acts of 1819. There had been a newspaper tax since Queen Anne's reign, but the new and more severe measure was directed against the Radical papers that were criticising the Government" (70).

¹⁷⁴ Thackeray's "Horae Catnachianae", a follow-up to "Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge", delved further into the ingrained social divisions among the classes. "All these people", he wrote of the low orders, "have their own society, manners, amusements, intrigues, crimes, follies, and fashions, just as well as the twelve thousand families whose names are registered in the *Court Guide*. Fraser sells to his thousands, but Catnach to his hundreds of thousands; who have this advantage over us, that while cheap printing, and the progress of the art of reading, the manners and amusements of the *Court Guide* world are well known to them, we have, on the contrary, no idea of their manners, no relish for their amusements, except as we see them in Boz's witty puppet-show; an entertaining exhibition, all must allow, but not a faithful one" ("Horae Catnachianae" 410). Thackeray's criticism of Dickens is a matter on its own.

tion—as they were to catch Collins’ interest twenty years later. The Seven Dials, a short walk from the Strand, was arguably one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods in London next to Wapping in the east, hard by the London Docks. Indeed, to venture amongst the savages of the capital was an enterprise not to be taken lightly. Any English gentleman eager, in the best anthropological way, “to examine the customs, the amusements, and the social condition of the inhabitants” (Thackeray, “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge” 280) was venturing into *incognita terra*. There was a huge chance of the intrepid adventurer coming back with “a coat from which the pockets have been ingeniously separated” or “a black eye, the parting gift of a native” (Thackeray, “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge” 280). Collins, apparently, never got presents like these when strolling around the East End of London, his attention caught by the literature of the impolite world as Thackeray called it. The hundreds of thousands rambling through the streets of the metropolis with money enough in their pockets to spend half-a-crown in cheap small quarto bound publications remained as mysterious to the cultivated public as they had been decades ago. Collins’ view of the unfathomable penny readership echoed Thackeray’s bleak view of the popularity of the penny journals as “dismal indications indeed of the social condition of the purchasers, who are to be found among all the lower classes in London” (Thackeray, “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge” 290). But whereas the latter merely lambasted the penny publications under review, Collins broadened the scope of his approach. Truly, when taking a glimpse of the contents of the penny journals he was staggered by the low literary standards achieved, the impolite world having indeed “a literature of its own” (Thackeray, “Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge” 280). But Collins was also intrigued by the incredible amount of readers eager to spend the little money they had in these atrocious literary commodities. It was a matter of time, he suspected, for the consumers of cheap literature to learn to discriminate and, consequently, to create a literary market of incredible proportions. Or so Collins believed in 1858. Later in his life, when most of his fiction was being serialised in provincial newspapers, he met strong resistance from their editors. As a northern newspaper complained, “[f]or our purposes his stories are too high-class” (qtd. in Peters 395). This was quite a different public from the one Collins was used to deal with, an audience whose capabilities for aesthetic discrimination remained still to be developed: “It is principally for the masses, and there-

fore the more sensational the more effective” (qtd. in Peters 394), another newspaper protested, seemingly ignorant of Collins’ standing as father of sensation fiction. To the writer’s astonishment, some of those magnates of the press even dared to request the manuscript of his upcoming novel “before they can decide to purchase the right of publishing the work in their newspaper columns” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 443).¹⁷⁵ Collins, half amused, half enraged, qualified them as a bunch of “curious savages” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 442).¹⁷⁶ They might well be so. But, savages as they were, Collins was forced to deal with them when confronted by the emergence of a mass market for fiction which he had already forecasted back in the mid-century.¹⁷⁷ No matter the time passed, the unknown public remained as removed from the known one as ever. Collins’ past optimism was eventually matched by reality.

5.5 OF PROGRESS AND ENGLISHMEN

“All over the country a smattering of one thing or another is given at haphazard”, wrote an anonymous contributor for *The Cornhill* magazine, “some things being taught, or professed to be taught, which might wait or be omitted; and no means whatever being used to adapt the knowledge to the pupils or qualify the pupils, in the first place, for benefitting by the knowledge” (“Middle-Class Education in England” 418). The complaint, although written in 1864, could well be applied to the past decade when a rising middle class devoted to the consumption of mass-produced commodities happily embraced books like Mr Timbs’ *Things Not Generally Known*. Collins, to his credit, never for a moment lost sight of the complexities of mid-century society: “There are some few subjects of public importance to the discussion of which we are always ready to apply ourselves in a spirit of the most questioning contentment and approval”, he wrote. “The great and general improvement in the condition of society; in its

¹⁷⁵ As Catherine Peters put it, during the 1880s “Wilkie was being attacked by the literary critics for being out of touch with contemporary taste, and by the suppliers to the masses for being too literary” (395).

¹⁷⁶ In a letter dated 8 February 1882 directed to his literary agent, A. P. Watt. Collins was one of very first Victorian writers to employ a literary agent. See Law, “The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace” 108-110.

¹⁷⁷ See Law, “The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace” 98.

principles and practice; in its stores of knowledge, its habits, manners, and modes of thinking, is one of these subjects” (“Highly Proper!” 361). Indeed, the improvement of society’s stores of knowledge was a subject of the utmost importance as the 1850s were drawing to a close. Truly, Collins argued, “no thoughtful man can look back, even through no longer a period than the last fifty years, without thankfully acknowledging that the British nation has been, up to this moment, both politically and socially, a notable gainer” (“Highly Proper!” 361). However, the progress accomplished could be easily unravelled no matter how great were the advances made in past decades. What Collins termed as barbarous forces—General Ignorance, General Prejudice and General Folly—threatened with undermining all the victories past achieved: snobs pretending to be sages were sprouting everywhere while a barely literate public filled the theatres of the nation and consumed fiction of the lowest quality. Plainly speaking, the condition of mid-century society did not look excessively bright: “Probably, the most dangerous national fault, of the moral sort, which we can now commit is to look too complacently at what we have done, and thereby to fall into the error of forgetting too readily all that we have still left to do”, wrote Collins in an uncharacteristic serious tone. “Strong as it has become, the new life of the nation, in this age, is still beset by base infirmities and lamentable weaknesses which its constitutional vigour has yet to throw off” (“Highly Proper!” 361).

Collins’ “Deep Design on Society” was published in January 1858, three months ahead of “Dramatic Grub Street” and barely six in advance of “The Unknown Public”. These articles form a sort of fascinating triptych about the unstoppable democratisation of taste that gained momentum during the 1850s. Writing for a middle-class magazine as *Household Words*, Collins was completely aware of the kind of public that purchased his fiction, a readership with enough educational background to be conversant with the arguments elaborated in Dickens’ weekly. His was a known public that bore little resemblance with the one fond of literary commodities of dubious standing. But a capitalist environment like that of mid-century England afforded opportunities enough for opposite audiences to meet. Collins’ “Deep Design on Society” told of the social newcomers eager to be assimilated into the middle class at no matter what cost. Boasting of unsubstantiated knowledge was one way. The other, and very close-

ly related, was the acquisition of taste. Art appreciation had been widened enough to the extent of being thought no longer an exclusive property of the happy few, but of the public at large. Collins perfectly captured this new sense of aesthetic entitlement when pointing out the equal consideration given to persons of cultivated and uncultivated tastes in the theatre: “My footman goes to see the play and actors, and cares very little what they perform in”, writes his fictional Mr Reader. “If my taste is not his taste, we may part at the theatre door,—he goes in, and I go home. It may be said, Why is my footman’s taste not to be provided for? By way of answering that question, I will ask another:—Why is my footman not to have the chance of improving his taste, and making it as good as mine?” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 266). Aesthetic democracy had conferred that privilege upon the likes of Mr Reader’s footman, prompting tradesmen thoroughly ignorant of the neighbouring country to attend French plays as if they were deeply acquainted with them. Collins’ Mr Reader had good reasons to wonder what place was left to a man “who has elevated his taste by making himself acquainted with the best modern literature of his own land” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 266) amongst theatrical audiences of this kind. As matters stood, one had to acquiesce with the pitiable state of the English stage and wait for a brighter future: “There is in this country a very large class of persons whose minds are stiffened by no Puritanical scruples”, Collins wrote, “whose circumstances in the world are easy, whose time is at their own disposal, who are the very people to make a good audience and a paying audience at a theatre” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 266). Indeed there were. But that very large number of persons amounted to a tiny minority when compared to those “who know nothing whatever, even by hearsay, of the progress of the literature of their own time” and “who are, to all social intents and purposes, as far behind the age they live in, as any people out of a lunatic asylum can be” (Collins, “Dramatic Grub Street” 269).¹⁷⁸ A theatrical audience in mid-century England necessarily entailed footmen, whether Collins liked it or not. The improvement of taste demanded so. It did not know of class differences.

¹⁷⁸ “We, the respectable people”, Collins wrote in another anonymous contribution to *Household Words*, “when we have a religious want or a political want, thoroughly understand the necessity of carrying out the desired object by sacrificing our own individual convenience to the first great consideration of the general benefit” (“Strike!” 169). However, an unwillingness to act for a social want was taken for granted.

Collins’ three aforementioned articles, “Deep Design on Society”, “Dramatic Grub Street” and “The Unknown Public” dealt with a changing social body trying to adjust to the quick pace of aesthetic democracy. Always a man deeply aware of the mechanisms of the book market, Collins had been careful to point out in “Deep Design on Society” what class of readers sustained the phenomenal success of *Things Not Generally Known*: “Are there sixteen thousand ignorant people who have bought this book, with the fell purpose of distinguishing themselves in society as I propose to distinguish myself?” (52), wondered his talkative bore.¹⁷⁹ Arguably yes, there were sixteen thousand brothers and sisters more than eager to distinguish themselves in society with the help of Mr Timbs’ book—and who could afford the 3s. 6d. required to purchase it, hardly an irrelevant amount bearing in mind that Dickens’ *Household Words* was priced at 2d. Badly literate and roughly numerically skilled, they benefitted from the quick pace of capitalist development during the mid-century with events like the Art Treasures Exhibition intended to ameliorate their cultural gaps. In a way, the Manchester showcase, as well as the success of the open Monday evenings at the South Kensington Museum, fulfilled Collins’ ambition of approaching art without the guidance of a supercilious elite of connoisseurs—most probably to an extent that he never dreamt of. Collins had been quite explicit in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) when encouraging those untrained in art education to rebel against the powerful grasp exerted by the self-appointed arbiters of taste, asking of “intelligent people of any rank ... to trust entirely to their own common sense when they are looking at pictures; and to express their opinions boldly” (193). After reading Collins’ “Deep Design on Society”, one cannot avoid thinking that his heartfelt interest in the Fine Arts got the best of him when asking the people at large to trust their own common sense. Because part of that intelligent public of any rank was the reason behind the success of Mr Timbs’ *Things Not Generally Known*. Collins might well claim in 1863 when publishing *My Miscellanies* that he stood by his call for aesthetic democracy in “To Think, or Be Thought For?”. His views, as he recollected, “were largely shared by readers with no ... vest-

¹⁷⁹ According to the Preface to the second edition of July 1856, *Things Not Generally Known* had reached a circulation of five thousand copies within four months of his publication: “As the taste of the day favours out-of-the-way reading, I have from its winding paths garnered into this little book a few of its stores for your special gratification”, wrote John Timbs. “Although the result may not be recommended by the quaint fancy of the *British Apollo*, or the profundity of the *Athenian Oracle*,—the *Notes and Queries* of other days,—I have not been unmindful of the value of pith and point upon subjects which you are not asked to take for granted in every instance, but in many cases to weigh and consider” (iii).

ed critical rights in old pictures” (*My Miscellanies* 193). But arguably with a vested interest of sorts as purchasers of that middle-class literary commodity called *Household Words*. What intelligent people of any rank meant for Collins, to my mind, had quite a restrictive sense: “In certain theatres, I fancy I notice already symptoms of a slight additional sprinkling of intelligence among the audiences”, he wrote soon after the Art Treasures exhibition. “If I am right, if this sprinkling increases, if the few people who have brains in their heads will express themselves boldly, if those who are fea to lead the opinion of their neighbours will resolutely make the attempt to lead it, instead of indolently wrapping themselves up in their own contempt—then there may be a creditable dramatic future yet in store for the countrymen of Shakespeare” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 270). The remark, bearing in mind Collins’ lambasting attack upon those who thought of themselves as entitled to lead the opinion of their neighbours in matters of painting, may sound surprising. But the kind of theatrical audience noticed by Collins was closer to the purchasers of penny journals than the relatively cultured readership of his weekly magazine. The public of *Household Words* had enough brains in their heads to be conversant with the topics presented to them by the likes of Collins whose deep interest in the stage, going back to the amateur theatrical representations of his early youth, most probably clouded his judgment. Because apparently it never crossed his mind that perhaps those appointed to lead the opinion of their neighbours, if they were to exist at all, might direct them to a conception of English drama quite different from his very own understanding of the craft. Eventually, as I noted before, Collins’ appeal to the “intelligent people of any rank” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193) proved quite a restrictive one. Were the few persons with brains in their heads to take the lead in theatrical matters, then a new breed of arbiters of taste was born. Collins’ call for an aesthetic rebellion of sorts against those upholding the rule of taste clearly did not reach all ranks of society. To my mind, it was a limited one, appealing to the realm of painting and a very restricted set of people, those with “a certain amount of education beyond the mere faculty of reading printed type” (Dixon 406). Which was precisely the kind of readership that purchased the weekly instalments of Dickens’ *Household Words*.

Any critical examination of mid-century England, no matter how superficial, inevitably brought to mind the extraordinary changes experienced by the country in the last decades: “We have, in most important respects, advanced resolutely, industriously and honourably from a state of past darkness to a state of present light”, Collins conceded. However, caution was still necessary: “Hardly a week passes without some event happening which, for the moment, staggers the belief of Englishmen in their own progress, and warns them that they have not gained ground enough, even now, to warrant any slackening of their pace on the forward march” (“Highly Proper!” 361). Collins’ articles for *Household Words*, I think, sprouted up from this sense of preoccupation and hope. Being a middle-class writer whose literary commodities were purchased by a literate and well-informed audience, Collins nonetheless took the trouble to think about what the aforementioned forward march meant for the future of English literature. And he was quite sure that things were to change dramatically once the unfathomable readership of the penny journals, or at least part of it, acquired a basic ability to discriminate. The unstoppable pace of progress was to achieve that miracle of sorts. Or so Collins believed until late in his career reality put a halt to his expectations when dealing with the proprietors of the northern newspapers. However, towards the end of the 1850s, the enormous gulf that separated the unknown public from the readership of *Household Words* remained as wide as ever. Casting a glance downwards from the lofty heights of Dickens’ weekly journal, Collins could well demand a much urgent “needful reform” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 267) for his beloved English stage. The theatre deserved a better audience than a populace whose idea of literature did not go further than the penny journal. Reading Collins’ article, it is inevitable to conclude that there was no serious public to appeal for when writing for the stage, no audience like that of *Household Words*. It was indeed a pitiable situation, one that even justified an aesthetic elitism of sorts for the better benefit of the barbarians who had invaded the English theatre. However, bad as a theatrical audience was in the mid-century, that did not prevent Collins from employing very similar tricks to those characteristic of the fiction enjoyed by “the lost literary tribes” (“The Unknown Public” 218) in his next literary commodity—although very cleverly adapted to the middle-class readership of Dickens’ new

literary endeavour, *All the Year Round*.¹⁸⁰ Collins was to excel in the trade of “serial publications and successful novels which address the educated classes” (“Dramatic Grub Street” 270) with the publication of *The Woman in White* (1859-1860). As matters turned out, his tribe, far from being lost, proved quite a supportive one.

¹⁸⁰ I thoroughly agree with Anthea Trodd when, writing upon Collins, she argues how the discovery of the penny journal public “influenced his development as novelist” (33). However, I dispute her assertion of Collins beginning “to formulate ideas about how this lost readership might be brought within the pale of mainstream fiction” (33). I could not find any trace of these ideas neither in Collins’ correspondence nor in a close reading of “The Unknown Public”.

6 *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* (1859-1860)

The publication of Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) in twenty monthly instalments priced at one shilling opened a new market for English literature in the nineteenth century.¹⁸¹ As Bill Bell rightly pointed out, "the rise of the serial was destined to be intimately tied to a number of technological and economic developments in the period, its emergence as a form related to its status as a low capital, high yield commodity" (125). In a time like the first decades of the nineteenth century, when capitalist development was accelerating, fiction published by instalments proved remarkably successful. *Pickwick's* serialisation, however, was far from a random occurrence. In fact, it was thoroughly indebted to Dickens' acquaintance with the penny journal.¹⁸² By his own confession, when a child he was a devoted reader of the *Terrific Register*, "making myself unspeakably miserable, and frightening my very wits out of my head, for the small charge of a penny weekly; which, considering that there was an illustration to every number in which there was always a pool of blood, and at least one body, was cheap" (qtd. in Altick, *The English Common Reader* 321). Serialised fiction, either in weekly or monthly instalments, was far more affordable than the expensive three-decker format and reached a public without the means, or the interest, to get a subscription from a circulating library.¹⁸³ Crucially, it also broke the linearity of literary production, that is, the passive consumption of literature, furnishing the reading public with a very limited amount of printed matter for a set time. Fiction published by instalments requested from the reader a deeper engagement than conventional narratives published in book form.¹⁸⁴ To this basic fact

¹⁸¹ According to Feltes, Dickens' *Pickwick* "marks the transition ... from the petty-commodity production of books to the capitalist production of texts" (3).

¹⁸² Serialisation of penny journals was hardly a nineteenth century innovation: "The immense popularity of Dickens' novels in part issue has tended to obscure the fact that literature in this form does in fact go back to the seventeenth century" (L. James 8).

¹⁸³ "The plan of serial publication of novels has manifestly many advantages", noted the *Publishers' Circular* (1866). "It may perhaps be said that no buyer of a magazine feels an interest in all the subjects of its articles. Many notoriously buy a periodical only for the sake of some story in it by a favourite author, and are wholly indifferent to the remainder of its contents. The purchaser of an instalment of a story, on the other hand, necessarily gets nothing but what he desires to have. The weekly issue must also have peculiar advantages; for who is not familiar with the complaint that the reader of monthly serials has lost the thread of a story before it is taken up again in the next number?" (qtd. in Brake 95). Most of Dickens' fiction was published in monthly issues with no extra content added.

¹⁸⁴ See Bell 129.

Dickens owed his success as an editor, with *All the Year Round*, started in 1859 after his abrupt departure from *Household Words*, following the same weekly pattern of his former magazine, a mixture of serialised fiction and articles upon diverse subjects.¹⁸⁵ Collins' first instalment of *The Woman in White* was published on 26th November 1859 after the ending of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. The latter even thought it necessary to prepare the reader for the upcoming serial and published an advertisement in *All the Year Round* backing Collins' new literary endeavour:

When purpose always reserving the first place in these pages for a continuous work of fiction, occupying about the same amount of time in its serial publication as that which is just completed. The second story of our series we now beg to introduce to our readers. It will pass, next week, into the station hitherto occupied by *A Tale of Two Cities*. And it is our hope and aim, while we work hard at every other department of our journal, to produce, in this one, some sustained works of imagination that may become a part of English Literature. (qtd. in Robinson 142)

Indeed, in mid-century England the novel was another commodity in the chain of production which required a sustained effort from the writer's imagination to cope with the dreadful deadlines of weekly (or monthly) serialisation. In this sense, N. N. Feltes' definition of commodity-text—that is, a text “produced by a writer within a determinate capitalist mode, a structure of specific means and relations of production, in which the series provides the distinctive form of control, and in which the profits are made by the ever more inevitable interpellation of a mass bourgeois audience” (Feltes 10)—best suits a time when the spread of capitalism was radically transforming the way culture was consumed amongst the masses. As I have already pointed out when dealing with Collins' “The Unknown Public” (1858), the changing mid-century readership proved fundamental in the development of the professional man of letters. The princely patron or the aristocratic minority noticed by Auerbach were no longer deemed relevant for a producer of fiction to succeed in the field of letters. True, there had been professional writers in the past, but their numbers do not match those of the practi-

¹⁸⁵ *All the Year Round* started on 30 April 1859 with *Household Words* ending four weeks later, on 28th May 1859. Quite interestingly, Dickens was both editor and publisher with *All the Year Round*: “Chapman and Hall served as agents for the new journal, but it was printed by the firm of Charles Whiting, and Dickens and Wills [his second in charge] were its sole proprietors” (Nayder 18).

tioners of the pen towards the mid-nineteenth century. As the years went by, any professional of the pen could confidently rely on a growing bourgeois audience for his financial support. Novels in the mid-century, Trollope stated, were “read right and left, above stairs and below, in town houses and in country parsonages, by young countess and by farmers’ daughters, by old lawyers and by young students” (219). Men like Collins were lucky indeed to live in a time when they could support themselves with the product of his brains. Either published in weekly or monthly instalments—later to be distributed in volume form by the circulating libraries—the commodity-text was firmly established when *The Woman in White* began serialisation in the winter of 1859. Collins, to his credit, did not take his undertaking lightly. As he wrote, it was indeed “a serious literary responsibility of appearing in the columns of ‘All the Year Round,’ immediately after Mr Charles Dickens had occupied them with the most perfect work of constructive art that has ever proceeded from his pen” (*The Woman in White* 644). Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* had cemented the success of the magazine. Now it was left to Collins to consolidate it.

6.1 A COMPLEX JIGSAW

From Trollope’s point of view, one of the key components for the success of serialised fiction was not “to be tedious in any single part” because any writer “when he embarks in such a business should feel that he cannot afford to have many pages skipped out of the few which are to meet the reader’s eye at the same time” (143-144). Provided the narrative was boring enough, the reading public would turn their attention to another literary commodity better suited to their tastes. Writing serialised fiction in weekly numbers was not an easy endeavour by any means: “It was a toss-up with Wilkie Collins when he began his story, on my leaving off”, Dickens wrote. “But he strung it on the needful strong thread of interest, and made a great success. The difficulties and discouragements of such an undertaking are enormous, and the man who surmounts them to day [sic] may be beaten by them tomorrow” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 321). Tediousness was a risk that Collins could not afford with *The Woman in White* following on the steps of Dickens. Indeed, in order to prevent pages from being “skipped out” what Edmund Yates called the *méthode Collins* was developed: namely, a series

of different steps to attract the reader's attention in order to secure the success of the serial publication. The first one of such steps was "to find a central idea, the second to find the characters, the third to let the incidents bring themselves about from the nature of the characters, the fourth to begin the story at the beginning—in direct opposition, be it observed, to the ancient system of plunging *in medias res*" (Yates 150). Collins, who in honour to truth never referred to his literary technique as a *méthode*, was nonetheless forced to develop a series of guidelines when writing serialised fiction conditioned as he was by the always terrifying deadlines—and all the more terrifying for being of weekly, and not monthly, nature.¹⁸⁶ As Collins remarked:

When I set down to write the seventh weekly part of *The Woman in White*, the first weekly part was being published simultaneously in *All the Year Round*, and in *Harpers Weekly*, no after-thoughts, in connection with the first part, were possible under these circumstances—the same rule applied of course week after week to the rest of the story. I had no choice but to know what to do beforehand throughout the whole story—and months before a line of it was written for the press, I was accumulating that knowledge in a mass of 'notes' which contained a complete outline of the story and the characters. (qtd. in Clarke 174-175)

Collins' accumulation of knowledge proved extremely helpful, the novel being completed one month ahead of the last instalment's scheduled publication on 25th August 1860.¹⁸⁷ *The Woman in White*, as many others instances of serialised fiction, was launched in volume form in

¹⁸⁶ A few years after Yates' article Collins told a German correspondent of his four rules regarding his writing technique: "First, the main idea. Secondly, the end. Thirdly, the beginning. The difficulty with carrying out this last rule, is that you always have to start from the beginning! Anyone who can solve that will also be able to manage the fourth rule—you must always be able to move the story forward. People often ask me about my 'secret' and that is what it is!" (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 376).

¹⁸⁷ Collins was deeply involved with the American publication of *The Woman in White*, sending the required sheets in advance by steamship to be ahead of unauthorised rivals. The American version of *The Woman in White* was serialised by *Harpers' Weekly* from 26th November 1859 to 4th August 1860—therefore finishing earlier than the English serialisation. The American edition was even cheaper—75 cents, less than a tenth of the guinea and a half—because of the non-existence of the three-decker format in the United States as well as the lack of international copyright. Only in 1886 was created the International Copyright Union due to the efforts of Great Britain and France—until then only reciprocal copyright was the rule amongst certain European countries.

advance of the serial's ending.¹⁸⁸ As a commercial strategy, it was a clever one since those aware of the novel in instalments and with money enough at their disposal could buy the book or borrow it from a circulating library in order to know the ending beforehand. Readers not so well off stuck to the serialised instalments as they always did. Needless to say, the kind of edition affected the development of the plot. Towards the mid-nineteenth century the novel had to function as a free-standing unit in weekly or monthly instalments as well as a much longer narrative under the shape of the three-volume format. Such literary devices as "the striking opening to increase the chance of a serial's 'taking' with the subscribers, the episodic integrity of the short instalment, and frequent 'climax and curtain' endings to make readers come back for more" (Law, "The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace" 100) were of common usage when writing serialised fiction. Indeed, the mode of publication conditioned the plot of *The Woman in White* to the point of adjustments being made once the novel was ready to be published in book form: "In presenting my book to a new class of readers, in its complete form", Collins wrote in the Preface for the volume edition of his novel, "... the division of the chapters, and other minor matters of the same sort, have been altered here and there, with a view to smoothing and consolidating the story in its course *through* these volumes" (645). Collins was perfectly aware of the minor adjustments to be made when dealing with a "new class of readers" willing to spend a fair amount of money either purchasing *The Woman in White* in book form or borrowing it from Mudie's and other circulating libraries.¹⁸⁹ The very particular demands of serial publication did not translate well when publishing the novel as a whole. In a letter to W. H. Wills, second in charge of *Household Words*, Collins acknowledged the lengthy first instalment of *The Woman in White*: "It is an awfully long

¹⁸⁸ The demands of the circulating library system imposed a careful timing from the writer's side impossible to ignore. For instance, the last instalment of Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) was serialised in *All the Year Round* at the beginning of August 1868, but the novel had been already published by Tinsley as a three-decker the previous month. The *Athenaeum* reviewer, the always incisive Geraldine Jewsbury, best summarised the situation when noticing how "[t]hose readers who have followed the fortunes of the mysterious Moonstone for many weeks, as it has appeared in tantalising portions, will of course throw themselves headlong upon the latter portion of the third volume, now that the end is really come, and devour it without rest or pause" (qtd. in Page 170). The same applied to the readers of *The Woman in White* since publication of the novel as a three-decker predated the final weekly instalment by one week.

¹⁸⁹ Collins, always aware of the intricacies of the English market of books, was not ignorant of the different reading audiences for serial and non-serial fiction: "If the readers who have waited until it was done, only prove to be as kind an audience as the readers who followed it through its weekly progress", he wrote in the Preface for the book edition, "'The Woman in White' will be the most precious impersonal Woman on the list of my acquaintance" (*The Woman in White* 645).

number—between 8 and 9 pages; but I *must* stagger the public into attention, if possible, at the outset”, he argued. “They shan’t drop a number when I begin if *I* can help it” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 180). Much was at risk when publishing the novel in weekly instalments, a number dropped fatal for the future of the serial. Collins took no chances with his first long serialised novel.

The plot of *The Woman in White*, as Collins recollected late in his life, revolves around “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” (“How I Write My Books” 511). His was indeed a very short outline of a complex literary jigsaw tainted by murder, bigamy, double identities and gender confusion. A succinct summary of the plot might go like this: Walter Hartright, a young drawing master from London, has secured a position in Cumberland as tutor of two young ladies on the recommendation of his friend Professor Pesca, a political refugee from Italy. While walking home from Hampstead before leaving for Cumberland, Hartright stumbles upon a mysterious woman dressed in white and, after helping her to find her way, learns that she has escaped from an asylum. Once at Limmeridge House, he becomes acquainted with the Fairlie family: Mr Frederick Fairlie, a collector of art treasures; Laura Fairlie, his niece; and Marian Halcombe, her half-sister. To Hartright’s surprise, Laura bears an astonishing resemblance to Anne Catherick, the woman in white, who lived in Cumberland as a child and became fond of Laura’s mother. Hartright and Laura eventually fall in love but she had promised to her late father that she would marry Sir Percival Glyde. Anne Catherick, after warning Laura against Glyde, meets Hartright, who thinks of Glyde as the man responsible for Catherick’s confinement in the asylum. Nothing prevents Laura and Glyde to marry and travel to Italy. Hartright joins an expedition to Honduras and leaves England. Back in England, Sir Percival and Lady Glyde moved to his family estate in Hampshire, Blackwater Park. Glyde’s friend, Count Fosco, who had married Laura’s aunt, Eleanor Fairlie, joins them. Marian Halcombe also moves to Blackwater and learns of Glyde’s financial difficulties. Sir Percival tries to bully Laura into signing a document which will give him control of her marriage settlement of £20,000. Mari-

an soon realises Fosco's role in the affair and suspects something worse coming since Anne is back again and promises to tell Laura of a secret which will destroy her husband. Marian, eavesdropping on Fosco and Glyde, is caught in the rain. Collapsing with a fever which evolves to typhus, she cannot prevent Laura of being tricked into travelling to London. There the switch of identities between her and Anne Catherick happens. The latter dies of a heart condition and is buried in Cumberland, meanwhile Laura is drugged and placed in the asylum as Anne Catherick. Marian, once recovered, visits the asylum trying to find out about Anne Catherick and there she finds Laura, who is commonly thought to be under the delusion of being Lady Glyde. After bribing the attendant, Marian helps Laura to escape. Hartright, returned from his trip, joins them and the three live together in a London slum, plotting to restore Laura's identity. The key to exposing the conspiracy rests on proving that Laura's journey to London took place after the date stamped on her death certificate. Hartright eventually discovers Glyde's secret when looking for evidence: he had forged the marriage register at Old Welmingham Church to conceal his illegitimacy. Glyde attempts to destroy the register entry, but the church vestry catches fire and he perishes in the flames. Hartright also discovers that Anne Catherick was the illegitimate daughter of Laura's father, which accounts for their uncanny resemblance. Hartright, trying to get some information on Fosco, asks Pesca for help and arranges a meeting between the two. The Count is terrified when he recognises Pesca as a fellow member of a secret Italian society. With this information on his power, Hartright forces a written confession from Fosco and Laura's identity is restored. Hartright and Laura marry and, on the death of Frederick Fairlie, their son becomes the Heir of Limmeridge.

Collins based the convoluted plot of *The Woman in White* on a real case that had happened in eighteenth century France compiled by Maurice Méjan in his *Receuil des Causes Célèbres et des arrêts qui les ont décidées* (1808), a book he found by chance in 1856 when rambling through Paris alongside Dickens.¹⁹⁰ As he told to his good friend the actor Wybert Reeve years later:

¹⁹⁰ There is another version about the genesis of the novel. John Millais (son of Sir John Millais) and Kate Perugini (née Dickens and Collins' former sister-in-law) pointed out Caroline Graves, one of two Collins' partners, as the woman who inspired *The Woman in White* during a chance encounter with Collins. But since both were late testimonies—Millais' from 1895 and Perugini's from the late 1920s—they must be disregarded. Clarke, nonetheless, suggests that the meeting between Collins and Caroline Graves “was certainly the basis for an important and dramatic incident in *The Woman in White*, but it did not prompt the novel” (101).

We came to an old bookstall—half shop and half store and I found some dilapidated volumes of record of French crimes, a sort of French *Newgate Calendar*. I said to Dickens, ‘Here is a prize!’ So it turned out to be. In them I found some of my best plots. *The Woman in White* was one. The plot of that has been called outrageous: the substitution and burial of the mad girl for Laura Glyde, and the incarceration of Lady Glyde as the mad girl. It was true, and it was from the trial of the villain of the plot—Count Fosco of the novel—I got my story. (qtd. in Reeve 459)

Volume 3 of Méjan’s book contained the “Affaire de Madame de Douhault”, the basis for the plot of *The Woman in White*. Born Adélaïde-Marie-Rogres-Lusignan de Champignelles (1741-1817), Madame de Douhault became a widow at the age of 46. Her father had died only a few years before and her brother, M de Champignelles, had seized a large part of Douhault’s inheritance. Towards the end of December 1787, she went to Paris in order to recover her father’s legacy through court. Staying in Orleans with her relative Madame de la Roncière, on the eve of her departure she was taken for a promenade by her hostess. After taking a bit of snuff offered by M de la Roncière, Madame de Douhault felt a violent headache and went home to get some sleep. Nevertheless, when the morning came, she woke up at the lunatic asylum of the Salpêtrière under the name of Madame Blainville. His brother had imprisoned her. Luckily, Madame Douhalt was able to communicate with her friend Madame de Polignac who freed her—and, interestingly, “the white dress she was wearing on her arrival at the Salpêtrière [sic] was restored to her” (Robinson 138). Despite Douhault’s true identity being asserted by her servants, her brother held the affair in the courts for several years and she passed away in 1817 without being acknowledged *as* Madame de Douhault.

When reading *The Woman in White*, the core of the plot, the confinement of the wealthy heiress Laura Glyde in a lunatic asylum, echoes Méjan’s account of Madame de Douhault. However, Collins added elements of his own: “One evening”, he wrote, “I happen to read of a lunatic who has escaped from an asylum—a paragraph of a few lines only, in a newspaper. Instantly the idea comes to me of a Walter Hartright’s midnight meeting with Anne Catherick, escaped from the asylum. *The Woman in White* begins again; and nobody will ever be half as much interested in it now as I am” (*The Woman in White* 650-651). That midnight random

encounter in the first serialised instalment proved momentous for the success of the novel in the pages of *All the Year Round*. And it was a success that extended to the book edition: “we start with 10.000 copies”, wrote Collins, “and Low expects to sell 50.000 before we have done!” (qtd. in Peters 234).¹⁹¹ At the time of being published in volume form in Britain, *The Woman in White* was also available in the United States and Canada with Tauchnitz’s English-language edition circulating through several European countries. The cheap one-volume format, the popular edition directed to middle-class readers who preferred to buy rather than to borrow from the libraries, came out in April 1861 at 6s.—almost a year later than the three-decker priced at one-a-half-a-guinea.¹⁹² It was truly a popular one, reaching, in Collins’ own words, a “far wider circle of readers than any to which the book has yet appealed” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 302). Priced at 6s., the cheap edition further cemented the novel’s popularity. *The Woman in White*, no matter the strong objections raised in certain literary corners, was thoroughly endorsed by the mid-century reading public in its different formats. A whole merchandising ensued around the novel, from *The Woman in White* perfumes and cloaks to waltzes and quadrilles available at music-shops.¹⁹³ Collins had good reasons to be exultant: “The critics”, as he wrote to his mother, “may go to the devil” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 188). Collins could not care less. The Intelligent Public was on his side.

Dickens thought of *The Woman in White* as a great improvement upon Collins’ previous literary productions: “In character, it is excellent”, he wrote to him. “Mr Fairlie as good as the lawyer, and the lawyer as good as he ... The story is very interesting, and the writing of it

¹⁹¹ The low offer made by George Smith, owner of the *Cornhill Magazine*, when presented with the manuscript of the novel, prompted Collins to approach Sampson and Low who eventually agreed for a three-year licence to publish the book in the three-decker format: “It was”, as Sutherland notes, “apparently, a leasing agreement, by which Collins got an agreed proportion of the profits of successive impressions of the novel” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 654). The deal proved satisfactory enough, with Collins eventually earning £1.400 from the copyrights, a huge sum at the time.

¹⁹² The delay between the first edition and the cheap reprint had been forced by the very peculiar workings of the English market of books: Mudie’s required enough time between the three-volume edition and the one-volume one “to allow full circulation for the earlier issue as well as for its sale in the bookselling department” (Griest 74). An early affordable reprint of a successful three-decker posited a threat for the secondhand department of the biggest circulating library of the country because of the large quantities of stock accumulated. Only when unwanted copies were disposed of was the cheap edition made available.

¹⁹³ See Robinson 149.

admirable” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 194). However, Dickens also expressed reservations. Reading the novel’s proofs at a time when the narrative had been told so far by Hartright, Halcombe and Vicent Gilmore, Fairlie’s family solicitor, Dickens thought of these character’s voices as having “a DISSECTIVE property in common, which is not essentially theirs but yours” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 195). Had Dickens be the one in charge of the narrative, his “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” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 195). Collins, he argued, was providing the reader with too much information: “I seem to have noticed, here and there, that the great pains you take express themselves a trifle too much”, Dickens noticed, “and you know that I always contest your disposition to give an audience credit for nothing—which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their audience—and which I have always observed them to resent when they find it out—as they always will and do” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 194).¹⁹⁴ Regardless of this minor complaint, however, Collins should be proud, having overcome the difficulties of weekly serialisation with *The Woman in White*. Many, Dickens wrote, would have crumbled when dealing with such a particular mode of publication: “No one else could do it, half so well” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 195). Indeed, Collins’ plot was a triumph of craftsmanship. Even for the anonymous reviewer of the *Critic* it was impossible not to be enthralled by *The Woman in White*. At least to a certain point: “This is not a novel which evokes the better feelings of human nature; it does not go home with you; you acknowledge its artistic construction, but you feel the want of nature; it roses your curiosity, it thrills your nerves, it fills you with admiration, contempt, indignation, hatred, but your softer feelings are seldom played upon” (qtd. in Page 82). Interestingly, Millais and the brethren were credited for Collins’ aesthetic take on the novel: “That there is an inclination of over-minuteness we cannot deny, but Pre-Raphaelitism is in the ascendant” (qtd. in Page 82). As far as the anonymous reviewer of the *Critic* went, Collins’ forensic narrative, relying on a careful rendition of facts, brought to

¹⁹⁴ Dickens wrote to Collins after the seventh instalment of *The Woman in White* was published in *All the Year Round*—ending when Walter Hartright leaves Limmeridge House just before Laura Fairlie’s marriage. It is possible that his letter accelerated the development of the plot, with the duel between Marian Halcombe and Count Fosco at Blackwater Park as a central point of this section of *The Woman in White*. However, Dickens relented a bit in his criticism: “But on turning to the book again, I find it difficult to take out an instance of this. It rather belongs to your habits of thought, and manner of going about the work” (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 194).

mind the exquisite attention of detail characteristic of the original Brotherhood—seemingly impervious to the fact that the movement had withered away long before the publication of *The Woman in White*. Dickens’ diatribe against Millais’ *Christ in the House of His Parents* still reverberated amongst certain quarters. The way Collins manipulated his narrative to hold the reader’s attention did not go unnoticed: “We were more struck by the general tendency of the book to sacrifice everything to intensity of excitement” (qtd. in Page 82). Had the reviewer being more attentive, he would have spotted the very peculiar mode of publication as the reason behind that intensity. For the anonymous critic of the *Saturday Review*, though, Collins’ novel was a superb literary puzzle: “When we have said that Mr Wilkie Collins succeeds in keeping up our excitement by the happy way in which he interweaves with mystery incident just sufficiently probable not to be extravagant, and that he is an adept at administering continual stimulants to our attention, we have said all” (qtd. in Page 84). However, most of Collins’ characters lacked any individuality whatsoever according to this critic: “Remove all that there is of rather improbable incident in the *Woman in White*, and you might burn what remains without depriving the world of any imaginative creation, any delineation of character, or portrait of human nature worth preserving” (qtd. in Page 85).¹⁹⁵ Collins’ use of several voices to foster the pace of the narrative might be ingenious, but it betrayed a sheer command of literary craftsmanship. The lifelike quality of the novel mounted to “a puerile and unworthy trick, one that shows that Mr Wilkie Collins mistakes the object of true art, which is certainly not to deceive” (qtd. in Page 86). There was talent in Collins, that the critic of the *Saturday Review* conceded, but whether it was a talent to be commended upon he could not tell.

However, better appreciations of the novel followed. The *Manchester Guardian*, notwithstanding its religious affiliation, thought highly of *The Woman in White* praising its plot as “an elaborate work of art” (qtd. in Page 89). The state of uncertainty under which the reader was kept throughout the novel showed Collins’ thorough command of his craft. No doubt there were mistakes in what concerned the chronology of the events narrated, as they were in the delineation of character, but, overall, *The Woman in White* stood out against other literary productions of the year. According to the anonymous reviewer, Collins “paints his scenes with

¹⁹⁵ “Estimated by the standard of great novels, the *Woman in White* is nowhere. It certainly is not pure gold. It is not even gold with an alloy. It is an inferior metal altogether, though good and valuable of its kind” (qtd. in Page 86).

a fulness and an accuracy which produces the effect of a stereograph” (qtd. in Page 91).¹⁹⁶ Mr Fairlie’s room, for instance, “stand[s] out before the eye like known familiar scenes” (qtd. in Page 91). Collins’ mechanical mannerism, so heavily criticised, was nowhere to be seen.¹⁹⁷ This positive appreciation was echoed by the *Spectator*. *The Woman in White* was, according to the unsigned reviewer, “by many degrees the best work of an author who had already written so many singularly good ones” (qtd. in Page 92). Credit should be given to Collins for keeping the reader’s interest through the customary three-volume edition—not a small feat when bearing in mind the complexity of the plot. Those blaming Collins for the artificiality of its construction were plainly misled according to the *Spectator*: “If *The Woman in White* were indeed a protected puzzle and nothing more, the reader’s attention would often grow languid over its pages” (qtd. in Page 92). The cohesiveness of the novel was beyond dispute. And as for the other complaint about Collins’ craft, his lack of interest for character development, be that the case, then the writer was not very different from other great artists. Even the genius of Shakespeare could not avoid undeveloped characters in his plays. In this sense, *The Times*’ anonymous long review delved deeper into the very peculiar structure of the novel: “In the method of story-telling devised by Mr Wilkie Collins the narrators are like the witnesses at a trial. Each one speaks according to his or her knowledge; the succeeding witness adds a few touches to the evidence of the previous one, and so the story moves forwards without interruption, and the reader’s curiosity is continually teased by a sense of mystery” (qtd. in Page 98). Inevitably, regardless of advancing the pace of the plot to the great advantage of the reader, this technique conveyed a sense of artificiality detrimental to the narrative: “The affectation of ignorance in almost every page is a prime necessity of his novel, and this ignorance he works up into a stimulant of curiosity” (qtd. in Page 99). Indeed, if this was Collins’ purpose, he had carried it out to the utmost: “He has perfectly succeeded in doing so, but it is at no small sacrifice of truth and nature” (qtd. in Page 99). The constant violations of the laws of

¹⁹⁶ The stereograph, the first ever mass-produced photographic device sold during the mid-century, was composed of two pictures mounted next to each other: the left picture represented what the left eye would see, and likewise for the right. When viewed with a set of lenses known as a stereoscope a single three-dimensional image was formed.

¹⁹⁷ In fact, Collins’ literary technique was praised since he “has devised this ingenious method by means of which an external and objective aspect is given to the whole story, while, nevertheless, it is presented from the different points of view in which it appears to several actors in it” (qtd. in Page 91).

probability, *The Times* complained, were a blemish to Collins' method of story-telling. A case in point was Frederick Fairlie:

This gentleman is a hypochondriac who carefully avoids trouble. On occasions of the greatest moment he has begged and implored to make a very slight exertion in order to avert from his relatives a great calamity. He is not to be moved. He refuses doggedly. This selfish and nerveless vegetable, who refuses to interest himself in the affairs of his relatives when every consideration of duty and palpable necessity would prompt, is induced when there is no necessity, when there is no duty, and when he has at last ceased to be on speaking terms with these relatives, to interest himself so far on their behalf as to take the, to him, enormous trouble of writing a long narrative which supplies certain missing links in the chain of evidence. (qtd. in Page 99-100)

The inevitable consequence, according to the reviewer, was a pervading sense of incongruity. However, the interest aroused by the plot was beyond dispute. *The Woman in White* might be a flawed work of fiction, *The Times* concluded, but it was an irresistible one: "We defy anybody to read Mr Wilkie Collins' tale for the first time without admitting it to be one of the most thrilling stories he has ever perused: but when the excitement is over, though not till then, he will be disposed to treat the whole thing as a joke" (qtd. in Page 102). Many would have failed where Collins succeeded. The web of improbabilities noticed by *The Times* was also hinted by the anonymous reviewer of the *Dublin University Magazine* who blamed "the spirit of modern realism" for having woven "a tissue of scenes more wildly improbable than the fancy of an average idealist would have ventured to inflict on readers beyond their teens" (qtd. in Page 104). As a novel, *The Woman in White* was an utter failure because of the innovation introduced by Collins of letting the characters speak by themselves: "Do we get any further or more important light into the depths of Mr Fairlie's small mind by perusing his statement of what befell himself at the time of Miss Halcombe's illness?" (qtd. in Page

107).¹⁹⁸ That was not the case plainly: “Would a sickly, lazy, irritable gentleman, taking up the parable sorely against his own will, have extended a very short story over some thirty pages, even though it was all taken down from his dictation?” (qtd. in Page 107). The story would have been far more effective if told in a more conventional way, the reviewer thought, with the plot advancing faster: “A story full of movement would not have kept us waiting so long ... among the art treasures of her silly and selfish uncle’s sitting-room at Limmeridge” (qtd. in Page 107). However, the anonymous pen behind the *Dublin University Magazine* failed to realise, as many others critics did, that Collins managed to battle the serial mode of weekly publication thanks to a plot relying on a tissue of elaborated improbabilities. And, when doing so, he also introduced a new literary genre in English fiction.

6.2 FATHER OF SENSATION FICTION

“Sensation”, first recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1779 meaning a violent or excited feeling, began to be applied to literature from 1861 onwards after the success of *The Woman in White*.¹⁹⁹ However, the genre to be known as sensation fiction was far from a novelty. As Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote, “[t]hat bitter term of reproach, ‘sensation’, had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsier Jourdain talked prose” (qtd. in Pykett, “Collins and the Sensation Novel” 253).²⁰⁰ Indeed they did, with Lyn Pykett amongst contemporary critics pointing out the connection between sensation and the Gothic novel “which employed a variety of devices (including the supernatural) to instil fear and terror into their readers, and whose plots often involved dynastic ambition and intrigue, and the persecution and imprisonment of

¹⁹⁸ This criticism brings to mind Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic novel in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984): “What unfolds in his works”, he writes, “is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness, rather a *plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (6). Arguably, such analysis also applies to Collins’ great novels of the 1860s.

¹⁹⁹ To my knowledge, the *Sixpenny Magazine* first used the term in September 1861 for both *The Woman in White* and *Great Expectations*. See Page 17.

²⁰⁰ Braddon was probably writing with Collins’ *Basil* (1852) on mind.

women” (*Wilkie Collins* 87). But she also notes how, “unlike Gothic novels”, sensation fiction dealt “with middle-class families (or the relations between middle-class and aristocratic families) in domestic settings in the English countryside, the suburbs, or the ‘respectable’ areas of towns” (*Wilkie Collins* 88). In my view, credit should be given to Collins for that innovation. Indeed, publishing *The Woman in White* in 1859 Collins started a new literary genre that came to define the 1860s literary marketplace. And, as a genre, common features were soon to be found. Thomas Hardy, once the sensation mania began to fade away, noticed how sensation plots usually revolved around a “long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance” involving different kinds of “murder, blackmail, illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets, a suggestion of bigamy, amateur and professional detectives” (qtd. in Pykett, “Collins and the Sensation Novel” 87). Indeed, Hardy’s “inwrought chain of circumstance” was not at all unknown to Collins who, when introducing the 1860 book edition of *The Woman in White*, explained at length how the development of its plot was propelled by the characters “all placed in different positions along the chain of events” and ready to “take the chain up in turn, and carry it on to the end” (644). This very particular construction, presented by Collins as a truthful account of facts carefully told in chronological order, became a staple of sensation novels after the success of *The Woman in White*—to questionable success. For many, the excessive reliance on the tropes established by Collins eventually proved tiresome and repetitive: “There is nothing so easy as the creation and the accumulation of fearful incidents after this fashion”, Trollope declared. “If such creation and accumulation be the beginning and the end of the novelist’s work,—and novels have been written which seem to be without other attractions,—nothing can be more dull or more useless” (228).²⁰¹ Always an acute observer of the nineteenth century literary marketplace, Trollope knew that dull novels were doomed to commercial failure. Charles Lever was a case in point.

Lever exemplifies the difficult position faced by those publishing fiction by instalments in the mid-century. A widely recognised author at the time, Dickens asked Lever to write the

²⁰¹ Trollope was not alone in his harsh view of sensation fiction. Regarding *The Woman in White*, the *Saturday Review* held a similar opinion: “His [Collins’] are works not so much for the library as for the circulating library. We should prefer hiring them out as we hire out a Chinese conjuror—for the night. As soon as we have found out the secret of his tricks, and admired the clever way in which he does them, we send him home again” (qtd. in Thoms 183).

serial to follow *The Woman in White* in the pages of *All the Year Round*. In fact, Lever was Dickens' second option after the refusal of George Eliot who, according to Dickens, was "terrified by the novel difficulties of serial writing" and "will not be up to the scratch when Collins's sponge is thrown up" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 215). Eliot was far too clever not to realise the limitations of this mode of publication, aware as she was of the constraints imposed by the terrifying deadlines and how they were to affect the development of her narrative. She was indeed lucky to avoid Lever's fate whose serial, *A Day's Ride*, was a total failure. Dickens was at pains to understand why the novel did not succeed: "Whether it is too detached and discursive in its interest for the audience and the form of publication, I can not say positively; but it does not *take hold*" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 321). The consequence, naturally, was the loss of money.²⁰² It can be argued that Lever fell in what Trollope called "that worst of literary quicksands, the publishing of matter not for the sake of the readers, but for that of the writer" (qtd. in Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* 177).²⁰³ Be that the case, it proved a fatal mistake. The readership of *All the Year Round* demanded a literary commodity suitable to their very particular tastes and expectations. And, most importantly, it was a commodity to be delivered on a very tight schedule. Used as he was to serialised fiction in monthly instalments, Lever proved incapable of accommodating to the new deadline forcing Dickens to adapt *Great Expectations* for weekly serialisation after the sudden conclusion of *A Day's Ride*. Not by chance Dickens told Lever that "some of the best books ever written would not bear the [weekly] mode of publication" (qtd. in Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* 177). Collins triumphed where Lever failed by reason of his clear understanding of the demands imposed by the serial mode of weekly publication. The long narratives could well evolve into "interminable descriptions, dull moralising, or tedious conversations" (qtd. in Griest 116) because of the required length to fill the three-volume edition. A compromise therefore was necessary in order to navigate two very different

²⁰² "The consequence is", Dickens wrote, "that the circulation becomes affected, and that the subscribers complain. I have waited week after week, for these three or four weeks, watching for any sign of encouragement. The least sign would have been enough. But all the tokens that appear, are in the other direction" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 321).

²⁰³ Lever was not alien to failures. When Chapman and Hall took him after Dickens' defection, his novel *Knight of Gwynne* (1847) passed unnoticed. Another well-known name during the mid-century, Harrison Ainsworth, saw his *Mervyn Clitheroe* (1851) cancelled after its fourth instalment.

modes of publication. As Collins reminded his readers in the Preface to the book edition of *The Woman in White*, “the inevitable suppressions which the periodical system of publication forces on the novelist” explained the “hundreds of little ‘connecting links,’ of trifling value in themselves, but of the utmost importance in maintaining the smoothness, the reality, and the probability of the entire narrative” (645). Only being aware of such intricacies could a novelist triumph when serialising fiction by instalments—or fail in the way Lever did. Collins never for a moment forgot how much was at stake. In a letter addressed to Miss Chambers, one of his many readers, he tried to calm down her anxiety regarding upcoming instalments of *The Woman in White*: “I beg to assure Miss Chambers, solemnly, that nobody about whom she is interested and over whom the undersigned can exercise benevolent control, shall come to any harm”, he wrote to her. “If she will look at the number published tomorrow, she will see that Laura is not murdered, and in another week she will know that Anne Catherick is caught” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 196). Collins’ benevolence, which proved crucial for the success of *The Woman in White*, brings to mind Feltes’ notion of the commodity-text as a “distinctive form of control ... produced by a writer within a determinate capitalist mode” (10). Cleverly manipulating to his better convenience the limitations imposed by the periodical system of publication, Collins captured the attention of the many Miss Chambers awaiting to know the fate of their heroines. Dickens was right. Not all the books could bear the weekly mode of serialisation. And not all the writers knew how to deal with it.

In the midst of the sensation mania that came to define the literary landscape of the 1860s, the anonymous hand behind the *Westminster Review* wrote, apropos Collins’ *Armada* (1864-1866), how sensation was “spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume” (qtd. in Page 158). Flawed as the analysis was—the issues for which sensation fiction became so successful had been a feature of the penny journal for long—nonetheless reflected the extraordinary success of the genre. The ideology of the “mass bourgeois audience” mentioned by Feltes, the main purchaser of that commodity-text called *All the Year Round*, was characterised—or we are told to have been characterised—by an idea of the home as a secure place where to take shelter from the outside world under the superintendence of a woman who embodied the do-

mestic ideal: “The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial;—to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and *always* hardened”, Ruskin wrote in “Of Queens’ Gardens”, a lecture included in *Sesame and Lillies* (1865). “But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence” (*Selected Writings* 158). The public sphere, being built and ruled by men, needed to be avoided by women to whom home provided with a safe environment being, as Ruskin put it, “the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division ... In so far as it is not this, it is not home ... it is only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in” (*Selected Writings* 158-159). Only inside the home could women be truly free:

This is wonderful!—oh, wonderful!—to see her, with every innocent feeling fresh within her, go out in the morning into her garden to play with the fringes of its guarded flowers, and lift their heads when they are drooping, with her happy smile upon her face, and no cloud upon her brow, because there is a little wall around her place of peace: and yet she knows, in her heart, if she would only look for its knowledge, that, outside of that little rose-covered wall, the wild grass, to the horizon, is torn up by the agony of men, and beat level by the drift of their life-blood. (*Selected Writings* 172)

Ruskin’s own psychodrama—and there is plenty of it in the above paragraph—should not taint his standing as the foremost art critic of the mid-century. The one-family household was approached by Ruskin as “a patriarchal autocracy ... a hierarchy of personal dependence” (Hobsbawm 237). And defiance, needless to say, was hardly tolerated. Arguably, the ideology that confined women inside the home—according to Ruskin, “the woman’s true place and power” (*Selected Writings* 159)—found its biggest foe in sensation fiction.²⁰⁴ Collins’ great novels of the 1860s can be approached, I think, as a carefully measured demolition attempt on the idea of home as “the place of Peace” where bliss is to be found and outside danger kept at bay. As the Archbishop of York pointed out, reviewing sensation fiction

²⁰⁴ To my mind, Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens” might well be an unintended consequence of the craze for sensation novels during the 1860s.

the very same year of the publication of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), the main aim of this kind of literature was "to persuade people ... that their comfortable and easy-looking neighbour had in his breast a secret story which he was always going about trying to conceal" (qtd. in Showalter, "Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion" 104). He was thoroughly right. When people were convinced that his neighbour could well be a murderer, a bigamist or maybe an impostor, then the fractures of the social body were exposed at its bleakest. Truly, as Henry James stated, to Collins "belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors" (qtd. in Page 122). *The Woman in White* confronted the middle-class audience of Dickens' magazine, the precious Intelligent Public, with the dangers lurking in their very own abodes. Hostility thrived behind walls, the very same walls that were supposed to protect Collins' readership from the violence of society.²⁰⁵ Sensation fiction depicted a merciless environment where survival was a dangerous enterprise of uncertain success. Home might well be a "place of Peace", but, provided the surface was scratched a little, quite a different picture emerged. And it was not a pleasant one.

Lukács' observation of literary genres growing "out of the concrete determinacy of the particular social and historical conditions" (qtd. in Frow 10) truly applies to mid-nineteenth century fiction, constrained as it was by an ideology that did not tolerate dissidence—at least not *excessive* dissidence. Books, it is worth bearing in mind, were traditionally read aloud in Victorian homes by the *pater familias* before a female audience. Not by chance women formed the bulk of Mudie's circulating library, with Griest stressing how "the subscribers who stepped from their carriages in New Oxford Street were predominantly women whose primary interests and occupations remained in the home" (126).²⁰⁶ Mudie's firm grasp upon the Victorian market of books, and his tough evangelicalism, meant, to the eyes of many, his unoffi-

²⁰⁵ Penny-issue fiction published during the eighteen-forties was heavily dominated by the so-called "domestic story", in which, according to the definition provided by G. D. Pitt in *The Wreck of the Heart* (1842), "the events are brought home to the evidence of our senses, as consonants with scenes of real life" (qtd. in James, *Fiction for the Working Man* 97). One suspects an influence of sorts of this kind of story upon the fiction read by Collins when perusing penny journals.

²⁰⁶ According to Jerrold E. Hogle women were the main consumers of Gothic fiction since the 1790s until the 1830s. In fact, he understands sensation fiction as an offspring of this "highly unstable genre" (1).

cial recognition as the watchdog of Victorian morals. However, his was a role performed with the complicity of customers and writers alike. Trollope best summarised this complex interplay between ideology and literature when pointing out how through his novels “girls learn what is expected from them, and what they are to expect when lovers come; and also from them that young men unconsciously learn what are, or should be, or may be, the charms of love” (220). Always the consummate professional, Trollope did not take risks with his literary commodities. He was perfectly aware of the role of fiction as an educational—and political—tool with rules of its own. A professional of the pen could only go to certain lengths in mid-century England. As the cunning Count Fosco tells Mariam Halcombe in *The Woman in White*, “[t]he storms of life pass harmless over the valley of Seclusion” making of “the modest repose of home ... eternally fresh” (457). Arguably, Mudie’s customers trusted his judgment to keep that repose untouched. Which might well explain why Collins ended *The Woman in White* with an appraisal of the charms laying behind that little wall around woman’s place of peace.

Challenging to the utmost the inconsistencies of the nuclear family around which the mid-Victorian ideal of the home had been built, sensation novels, as far as I know, all concluded with a happy ending achieved after a succession of betrayals, murders, and physical as well as psychological violence.²⁰⁷ *The Woman in White* is not an exception, its plot closing with the marriage of the drawing master Walter Hartright to the wealthy heiress Laura Fairlie and the restoration of home as haven. Sensation fiction, even though it threatened the social order upon which mid-nineteenth society was built, eventually reasserted the very same values that, at least in appearance, it aimed to subvert. There was little option left. Any writer should proceed carefully when dealing with his readers, bound as he was by the peculiarities of the English market of books. Collins learnt this valuable lesson from Dickens himself: “Beware of writing things for the eyes of everybody, which you would feel the smallest delicacy in saying anywhere”, the latter warned him. “Mrs Scutfidge may have stripped in pub-

²⁰⁷ “One of the most shocking and thrilling aspects of sensation fiction, as far as its first readers and reviewers were concerned”, Pykett writes, “was the fact that the action of these fast novels of crime and passion usually occurred in the otherwise prosaic, everyday, domestic setting of a modern middle-class or aristocratic English household” (*The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* 8). But this was a domestic setting, Pykett forgets, eventually vindicated with the triumph of the hero or heroine.

lic—I have no doubt she did—but I should be sorry to have to tell young ladies so in the nineteenth century, for all that” (qtd. in Peters 101). All of Dickens’ magazines were edited bearing in mind the particular middle-class mores of their audience. In fact, it can be argued that Dickens’ success as a novelist and editor was greatly indebted to his understanding of the novel as a commodity-text addressed to a reading public who tolerated dissidence only to a certain extent. Collins had to provide his readership with a satisfying ending after the grotesqueries of *The Woman in White*. He could not do otherwise. The subscribers stepping from their carriages into Mudie’s shop, most of them young ladies, demanded so.

Mid-century serialised fiction, at least the kind of fiction published by *Household Worlds* and *All the Year Round*, was another unintended consequence of the spread of capitalist development. Professional writers like Dickens, or Collins for that matter, never for a moment doubted the commercial nature of their literary endeavours. Consequently, to what extent their craftsmanship was compromised by the demands of a very particular audience still remains an open question. To Thackeray, writing at a time when Dickens’ fame was on the rise, the supposed realism of the author of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) was, to say the least, objectionable. As he put it in one of his best crafted journalistic pieces, “Going to See a Man Hanged” (1840), Dickens’ literary tricks were far too evident for any attentive observer to miss. When attending a public execution at the Newgate prison, Thackeray came across a girl that could well be a study for the Miss Nancy of *Oliver Twist* were it not for the harshness of her real-life persona. For Thackeray, “Boz, who knows life well, knows that his Miss Nancy is the most unreal fantastical personage possible; no more like a thief’s mistress than one of Gesner’s shepherdesses resembles a real country wench” (“Going to See a Man Hanged” 119). As Thackeray saw it, Dickens was a master at depicting incongruous characters with no relation whatsoever with reality. The virtues of ladies like the real Nancy were quite at odds with the expected behaviour of a respectable girl: “On these an honest painter of human nature has no right to dwell; not being able to paint the whole portrait, he has no right to present one or two favourable points as characterising the whole; and therefore, in fact, had better leave the picture alone together” (Thackeray, “Going to See a Man Hanged” 119-120). Were any writer eager to depict the full complexities of the character, his professional career would be des-

troyed by the uproar to follow.²⁰⁸ Dickens, Thackeray argued, no matter how much he boasted of his knowledge of real life, was far from being an honest painter of human nature. However, to my mind, it would be much more accurate to say that the editor of *Household Words* was mindful of the limitations imposed by his reading public, a constraint upon which Thackeray always laughed aloud—albeit in a way that made his readers to be complicit with the joke. To write things for the eyes of everybody entailed serious risks for any professional writer which no many were willing to take. It was better to ignore Mrs Scutledge’s behaviour than confronting young ladies with it. Dickens’ long professional career in the field of letters entitled him to warn Collins about the dangers of the English market of books. Arguably, it was a warning that Collins took lightly, pushing the boundaries of what was deemed permissible with his fiction. He soon realised that that the readers of *All the Year Round* should be staggered all along the way until the last instalment of *The Woman in White* hit the bookstalls. Success in the merciless market of serialised fiction was not easy to achieve. And, in my view, the penny dreadfuls devoured by the unknown public showed him the path ahead.

Margaret Oliphant, when reviewing Dickens’ *Great Expectations* alongside *The Woman in White*, wondered “how far it is wise, or how far it is expedient, for art to forsake the educated world, and betake itself in search of fresh nature and unsophisticated character to the lowest levels of society, and there to the farthest fringe which divides social guiltlessness (for we cannot say innocence) from crime, is, to our own thinking, a very doubtful question” (581). Oliphant, writing in 1862 at the peak of sensation mania, was clever enough to suspect the influence of the lowest literary genres upon the composition of *The Woman in White*. Indeed, the aforementioned literary devices characteristic of serialised fiction—the striking opening, the episodic integrity of the short instalment, and the ‘climax and curtain’ endings—were a common staple of penny journals for long.²⁰⁹ Oliphant immediately realised how crucial was for the novel its serialisation by weekly instalments: “The violent stimulant

²⁰⁸ Thackeray further elaborated on this: “The new French literature is essentially false and worthless from this very error—the writers giving us favourable pictures of monsters, and (to say nothing of decency and morality) pictures quite untrue to nature” (“Going to See a Man Hanged” 120). Or maybe quite true—too much so.

²⁰⁹ The connection between penny journals and the Gothic novel was pointed out by Altick when describing the former as “a crude sixpenny leaflet, bound in blue covers, which abridged into thirty-six pages or so all the heart-stopping excitements contrived by the school of Clara Reeve and Monk Lewis” (*The English Common Reader* 288-289).

of serial publication—of weekly publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident—is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ [of sensation fiction], and bring it to fuller and darker bearing” (568).²¹⁰ If she was right, and Collins had successfully mingled the popular and the middlebrow in his commodity text, then the boundaries between low and high fiction were substantially blurred with the serialisation of his novel. Collins, I think, did indeed obliterate genre distinctions with *The Woman in White*. The issues for which his serial achieved such phenomenal success—murder, bigamy and hidden identities—were to be found in the pennies that caught Collins’ attention when rambling through the cobbled streets of East London. *The Woman in White* exploited to its best convenience issues more proper to the cheap literature read by kitchen maids than the respectable parlours of Mudies’ customers who no doubt found the literary commodity all the more appealing for that. However, Collins’ extant correspondence from this period does not provide any clarification upon the influence of the fiction devoured by the unknown public on the composition of his novel. But a closer look at later events suggests how much thought he devoted to the lowest of literary genres. In 1867, when Smith & Elder refused to bid for the copyrights of *Armadale* (1864-1866), Collins wrote of his intention of opening communications with the proprietors of the penny journals “and we shall see what an entirely new public has to say to me” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 281). It was a startling declaration of intentions coming out from a man whose fame, at least right in the middle of the 1860s, rivalled that of Dickens. Cheap literature never stopped exerting a fascination of sorts upon Collins: “If ‘The Woman in White’—with which I shall start the other experiment—takes the penny public”, he further argued, “I will write a new book for them” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 281-282). Collins clearly saw the penny readership as thoroughly opposed to the audience of the well-regarded magazines where his novels were being serialised. Such bravado, however, came to nothing and eventually *The Woman in White* was never adapted for the penny journal

²¹⁰ In the wake of *Great Expectations*, a book that Oliphant found in clear disadvantage to *The Woman in White*, she wondered whether Dickens “or anybody else will be able to keep that restless agency going without descending to the expedients of the *feuilletonists*, remains yet to be proved” (584). Probably she was referring to the literary hacks of the penny journal industry. Oliphant was far from confident in the future development of the genre: “What Mr Wilkie Collins has done with delicate care and laborious reticence”, she wrote despite her reservations on the novel, “his followers will attempt without much discretion” (568).

market.²¹¹ But Collins' bold statement evinces his constant, and apparently never diminished, interest for the literature of the million fingered audience lurking in the shadows of literary respectability.

To approach *The Woman in White* as a commodity-text—that is, a text thoroughly indebted to its very particular mode of production in a capitalist environment—helps, I think, to understand the complex workings of the English market of books towards the mid-century. Manipulating to his convenience the time gap afforded by weekly serialisation, and cleverly exploiting the buried fears and anxieties of his middle-class readership, Collins created the perfect literary commodity for the commercial 1860s. Enough drama was playing behind the little rose-covered walls of his readers' homes to be worried about the hostile society of the outer world. I do not necessarily agree with John Sutherland when he credits the success of Collins' novel to a “larger *middle class* readership that conventional trading wisdom assumed to exist and one that was prepared to put its hand into its pocket to get the fiction it liked” (*Victorian Novelists and Publishers* 142). That large middle-class readership had been the reason for Dickens' success with *The Pickwick Papers* back in 1836, well ahead of the serialisation of *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round*. Trading wisdom was not indeed lacking amongst professionals of the pen like Collins whose mercenary commercial acumen never deceived him: “I recognise no difference between the purchase and sale of a book and the purchase and sale of any other marketable commodity” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 371), he quite explicitly remarked when touring the United States in the 1870s.²¹² Almost thirty years of professional experience backed such bold statement. However, there were books and *books*.

²¹¹ Although the penny edition of *The Woman in White* never materialised, Collins, in a letter to his mother, further developed his intention of approaching the penny public: “I have a splendid idea for boiling down the Lighthouse, The Frozen Deep, and The Red Vial in One Novel. If the penny journals take to the Woman in White [*sic*], the penny journals shall have the new Novel. It will be just the thing for them” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 282). In the same letter dated 8 January 1867 he also adopted a much milder approach in his criticism of Smith & Elder. Later, towards 1884, he encouraged his literary agent to accept a proposal relative to the “halfpenny public” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 4: 41) that seemingly came to nothing.

²¹² The subject under discussion was the copyright of his books. Addressing the Canadian publishers Hunter, Rose & Co, Collins was adamant about the ownership of his novels: “I claim as an English citizen, my English copyright in an English colony—subject to the authority to the Queen of England” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 371). The solution to avoid piracy in Canada was obvious to him: to ban the sale of English reprints by American booksellers making of the Canadian publication the only one available in the colony.

Collins, no matter how acute his business instincts were, always thought of his profession as a craft that deserved careful attention. His fiction might well be a half disposable commodity, but there is no doubt that he approached the other half as elaborated craftsmanship. And *The Woman in White* was not an exception.

6.3 AN APPRECIATOR OF THE BEAUTIFUL

The plot of Collins' novel comprises a brief span of time. Following the book division in three volumes, the First Epoch starts in 1849 and the Third (and final) ends two years later, in 1851. The choice of dates, although seemingly coincidental, sets the novel against a complex social and political background: "The year of which I am now writing", Walter Hartright points out, "was the year of the famous Crystal Palace Exhibition in Hyde Park" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 578). Also, to be known as the Great Exhibition, the London fair was a gigantic showcase of industrial manufactures from all around the world whose ultimate aim was to assert the leading role of England amongst the advanced nations. The country had reasons enough to celebrate, having avoided the perils of the revolutionary movement that swept the continent a few years before.²¹³ As it happened, the Hyde Park event proved a spectacular success, attracting thousands of visitors: "Foreigners, in unusually large numbers had arrived already, and were still arriving in England" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 578). The Great Exhibition marked a turning point in the history of the country. For the Marxist critic Arnold Hauser, "[t]he mid-Victorian age is, in contrast to the early Victorian period, an age of prosperity and pacification" (*The Social History of Art* 4: 122). It proved indeed quite a remarkable time. England, as Hauser pointed out, "becomes the 'workshop of the world', prices rise, the living conditions of the working class are improved, socialism is rendered harmless, the political ascendancy of the bourgeoisie is consolidated" (*The Social History of Art* 4: 122). Nevertheless, this depiction of the 1850s as an epoch of prosperity and pacification must be taken with caution. Collins, who at the very beginning of the decade was working as a journalist for the

²¹³ "Eighty forty-eight, the famous 'springtime of peoples', was the first and last European revolution in the (almost) literal sense, the momentary realisation of the dreams of the left, the nightmares of the right, the virtually simultaneous overthrow of old regimes over the bulk of continental Europe west of the Russian and Turkish empires, from Copenhagen to Palermo, from Brasov to Barcelona. It had been expected and predicted. It seemed to be the culmination and logical product of the era of dual revolution" (Hobsbawm 2).

leftist *The Leader*, gave a different view of the time in his anonymous review “A Plea for Sunday Reform” (1851) for *Bentley’s Miscellany*: “We want reform”, he wrote, “[w]e are calling for reform pretty loudly in various matters—in Church doctrines; in Bishop’s incomes; in taxation; in the franchise; in Government offices; in drainage; in street architecture; in the treatment of the poor; in a whole host of errors and corruptions, religious, political, and social, too many for enumeration” (925).²¹⁴ To render the mid-century as a repository of peace and happiness in the way Hauser did is, to my mind, a simplification of a much more complex decade. Were that the case, then calls for reform would not make sense. And, as Collins noticed, they were indeed too many to be enumerated. By the time of publication of “A Plea for Sunday Reform” urban manufacturers and purchasers from all over England were flocking to the “famous Crystal Palace Exhibition” thanks to “the iron veins that traverse the frame of our country” (Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 27). For better or for worse, the country was changing at a pace never seen before. In this sense, Collins’ late assertion of “Art” being “above the operation of the ordinary laws of supply and demand” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 467) was mere wishful thinking. He had been much more truthful to the real nature of his profession when assimilating the product of his brains to any other marketable commodity. Working as a producer of serialised fiction, Collins soon realised the difficulties of trying to reconcile Art with the ordinary laws of supply and demand. Eventually, he, as any other professional writer, was thoroughly dependent on the success of his narrative for a living. And that success rested on an increasingly confident middle class eager to put its hand into its pocket to get the fiction it liked. In the mid-nineteenth century, anyone devoted to the craftsmanship of the pen was forced to deal with more mundane concerns than the calling of the muses. Collins’ *The Woman in White*, as a commodity-text intended for a literate middle-class audience, was thoroughly indebted to its time.

²¹⁴ *The Leader*, founded in 1850, favoured free discussion of the most varied subjects: “Conceived in the old Radical spirit of Hunt and Place, it urged the brotherhood of man, supported Continental revolutionary movements and praised American republicanism” (C. Chapman 67). The journal was Collins’ main source of income until joining *Household Words*. Following Kirk H. Beetz, *The Leader* gave Collins “the opportunity to develop his literary sensibilities” (25).

As the plot of *The Woman in White* unfolds, the drawing master Walter Hartright sets foot to Cumberland in order to teach two young ladies how to sketch from nature under the patronage of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire of Limmeridge House. Hartright, once arrived, takes a quick look to his sitting-room: "The furniture was the perfection of luxury and beauty; the table in the centre was bright with gaily bound books, elegant conveniences for writing, and beautiful flowers", he writes. "The second table near the window, was covered with all the necessary materials for mounting water-colour drawings ... the walls were hung with gaily tainted chintz, and the floor was spread with Indian matting in maize-colour and red" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). The room marks a stark contrast with Hartright's bleak and small bachelor lodgings in London: "It was the prettiest and most luxurious little sitting-room I had ever seen; and I admired it with the warmest enthusiasm" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). Hartright's expectations regarding his new patron cannot be more favourable. However, the Esquire of Limmeridge House seems quite an elusive character: "What am I to tell you about Mr Fairlie?", Hartright is told by Marian Halcombe, half-sister to his other student, before his meeting. "Upon my honour, I hardly know. He is sure to send for you after breakfast, and you can study him for yourself. In the meantime, I may inform you, first, that he is the late Mr Fairlie's younger brother; secondly, that he is a single man; and, thirdly, that he is Miss Fairlie's guardian ... Mr Fairlie is too great an invalid to be a companion for anybody" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 34). Provided with such scant information, time eventually comes for the drawing master to meet his new patron. Following Mr Fairlie's valet, Hartright is soon lost in a maze of corridors crossing the innermost recesses of Limmeridge House: "We turned a corner, and entered a long second passage, ascended a short flight of stairs at the end, crossed a small circular upper hall, and stopped in front of a door covered with a dark baize" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). The door, once opened, leads to another. Two curtains of pale sea-green silk are disclosed by the valet who, raising noiselessly one of them, "softly uttered the words, 'Mr Hartright,' and left me" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). A magnificent carved ceiling welcomes Hartright, who steps upon a carpet of a thickness and softness so extraordinary that reminds him of velvet. On inspecting the room, he immediately notices "a long book-case of some rare inlaid wood that was quite new to me" being "not more than six feet high, and the top was adorned with statuettes in marble, ranged at regular distances one

from the other” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). A closer inspection of the room shows the amount of art treasures stored up: “On my right and on my left, as I stood inside the door, were chiffoniers and little stands in buhl and marqueterie, loaded with figures in Dresden china, with rare vases, ivory ornaments, and toys and curiosities that sparkled at all points with gold, silver, and precious stones” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). But a single object stands out amongst many. Placed between two antique cabinets “hung a picture of the Virgin and Child, protected by glass, and bearing Raphael’s name on the gilt tablet at the bottom of the frame” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38-39). The Renaissance painting presides over the room as an icon dominates an orthodox church. Large blinds temper the sunlight that intrudes through the windows and, because of the pale sea-green curtains, “the light this produced was deliciously soft, mysterious and subdued” falling upon all the objects in the room and giving the place an “air of profound seclusion” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). In this very particular environment the master of the house sits leaning back in a large easy-chair “listlessly composed ... with a reading easel fastened on one of its arms, and a little table on the other” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). Hartright has finally met his patron.

Over fifty and under sixty years old, Frederick Fairlie’s physical features immediately capture the attention of the drawing master. Fairlie’s face is “thin, worn, and transparently pale, but not wrinkled; his nose was high and hooked; his eyes were of a dim grayish blue, large, prominent, and rather red round the rims of the eyelids; his hair was scanty, soft to look at, and of that light sandy colour which is the last to disclose its own changes towards gray” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). Dressed in a dark frock-coat of some kind of rare and extraordinarily light material, and wearing a waistcoat and trousers of immaculate white, Fairlie applies to himself the very same exquisite attention to detail that pervades his room: “His feet”, notes Hartright, “were effeminately small, and were clad in buff-coloured silk stockings, and little womanish bronze-leather slippers. Two rings adorned his white delicate hands, the value of which even my inexperienced observation detected to be all but priceless” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). If the drawing master had expected a living embodiment of the masculine virtues traditionally attributed to the English landowner, then he was utterly disappointed. A disturbing sense of effeteness pervades the whole persona of Frederick Fairlie who bears “a frail, languidly-fretful, over-refined look, something singularly

and unpleasantly delicate in its association with a man, and, at the same time, something which could by no possibility have looked natural and appropriate if it had been transferred to the personal appearance of a woman” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39-40). As an exotic plant grows in a greenhouse, so the Esquire of Limmeridge House thrives in the seclusion of his chamber of art treasures. However, on closer inspection, Fairlie is far from being as idle as Hartright thought. Actually, the former is immersed in a very particular task: “Placed amid the other rare and beautiful objects on a large round table near him, was a dwarf cabinet in ebony and silver, containing coins of all shapes and sizes, set out in little drawers lined with dark purple velvet” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). One of these drawers rests in a small table attached to Fairlie’s chair, full with tiny brushes and a small bottle employed by the Esquire in the cleaning of what, to Hartright, looked like “a dirty pewter medal with ragged edges” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Indeed, so devoted is the Esquire to his task that he barely notices the drawing master standing in the middle of the room.

“So glad to possess you at Limmeridge, Mr Hartright”, Fairlie eventually says in a querulous, croaking voice that combines, in anything but an agreeable manner, a discordantly high tone with a drowsily languid utterance: “Pray sit down. And don’t trouble yourself to move the chair, please. In the wretched state of my nerves, movement of any kind is exquisitely painful to me” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Not even allowing time for Hartright’s reply, Fairlie closes his eyes and holds one of his hands in awe. The croaking voice soon apologises: “Pray excuse me. But could you contrive to speak in a lower key? In the wretched state of my nerves, loud sound of any kind is indescribable torture to me. You will pardon an invalid? I only say to you what the lamentable state of my health obliges me to say to everybody” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Hartright, informs the Esquire, has the immense fortune of having landed in a home where his status as an artist is properly recognised. Limmeridge House, Fairlie proudly declares, is a refuge from the aesthetic wilderness prevailing outside doors: “There is none of the horrid English barbarity of feeling about the social position of an artist in this house. So much of my early life has been passed abroad, that I have quite cast my insular skin in that respect”, he remarks whilst cleaning his coins. “I wish I could say the same of the gentry—detestable word, but I suppose I must use it—of the gentry in the neighbourhood. They are sad Goths in Art, Mr Hartright. People, I do assure you, who

would have opened their eyes in astonishment, if they had seen Charles the Fifth pick up Titian's brush for him" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 41). Hartright, when asked if he finds the rounded metals as fascinating as Fairlie does, assents to the great satisfaction of the Esquire: "So glad we have another taste in common besides out taste for Art" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 41), retorts Fairlie, happy to have found another appreciative soul untainted by ignorance and brutality.²¹⁵ However, not even in the isolation of Limmeridge House is the Esquire protected from the barbaric hordes ravaging mid-century England.

Hartright's close examination of the Esquire's watercolours comes abruptly to an end when the latter, uttering a feeble mutter, wonders whether he has heard of any children playing in his private garden down below. Despite Hartright's reassurances of having heard nothing, the Esquire persists in his request: "Oblige me—you have been so very good in humouring my poor nerves—oblige me by lifting up a corner of the blind. Don't let the sun in on me, Mr Hartright! Have you got the blind up? Yes? Then will you be so very kind as to look into the garden and make quite sure?" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). But nothing is spotted from the window except a garden completely walled in: "Not a human creature, large or small, appeared in any part of the sacred seclusion", writes Hartright. "I reported that gratifying fact to Mr Fairlie" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). It is indeed a most gratifying fact for the Esquire who thanks heaven for not having children in the house. The servants, he complains to Hartright, being clearly persons without nerves, do not care at all for his well-being and invite the youth from the village to stroll around to Fairlie's dismay: "Such brats—oh, dear me, such brats!" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40) complains the suffering victim. "Shall I confess it, Mr Hartright?—I sadly want a reform in the construction of children. Nature's only idea seems to be to make them machines for the production of incessant noise. Surely our delightful Raffaello's conception is infinitely preferable?" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 43). It is a delightfulness not perceived by Hartright who merely notices one Madonna surrounded by cherubs resting on buff-coloured clouds. The Esquire, however, is completely enraptured by the painting:

²¹⁵ Chauncey Hare Townshend, an irregular contributor of *Household Words* and a mutual friend of Collins and Dickens, might have been a model for Frederick Fairlie. A collector of jewellery and art, as well as a hypochondriac, Townshend was, according to Peters, "one of the first connoisseurs of photography as an art form" (133-134) and quite a recluse. Dickens wrote of him being "mostly shut up in his beautiful house" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 9: 20).

‘Quite a model family’, said Fairlie leering at the cherubs. ‘Such nice round faces, and such nice soft wings, and—nothing else. No dirty little legs to run about on, and no noisy little lungs to scream with. How immeasurably superior to the existing construction! I will close my eyes again, if you will allow me. And you really can manage the drawings? So glad. Is there anything else to settle? If there is, I think I have forgotten it. (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44)

Aware as he is of being a nuisance for his patron, Hartright decides for a speedy conclusion to his interview and asks what kind of instruction is to be given to the two young ladies under his care: “I wish I felt strong enough to go into that part of the arrangement—but I don’t”, retorts Fairlie. “The ladies, who profit by your kind services, Mr Hartright, must settle, and decide, and so on, for themselves. My niece is fond of your charming art. She knows just enough about it to be conscious of her own sad defects. Please take pains with her ... Is there anything else? No. We quite understand each other—don’t we?” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). Fairlie’s wretched nerves no longer tolerate more strain: “I have no right to detain you any longer from your delightful pursuit—have I? So pleasant to have settled everything—such a sensible relief to have done business” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). The prospect of being left alone occupied in the vital task of cleaning his coins is far too enticing for the Esquire. To prevent further interruptions, and despite being extremely glad of *possessing* the drawing master during his time at Limmeridge House, Fairlie apologises for his inability to hold future meetings due to his ill health: “I am such a sufferer that I hardly dare hope to enjoy much of your society. Would you mind taking great pains not to let the doors bang, and not to drop the portfolio? Thank you. Gently with the curtains, please—the slightest noise from them goes through me like a knife. Yes. *Good morning!*” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). In this way comes to an end the interview of the London teacher of drawing with his new patron in a remote Cumberland house. Fairlie, to put it mildly, did not live up to Hartright’s expectations. In fact, the meeting left a lasting impression on the young artist who is adamant in his resolution of avoiding any kind of further contact with the master of the house. Hartright, once the two baize doors closed after him, stops for a moment to take a luxurious

breath of pure air: “It was like coming to the surface of the water after deep diving, to find myself once more on the outside of Mr Fairlie’s room” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 45). The air of profound seclusion first noticed by Hartright eventually took its toll on him. He has emerged (relatively) unscathed from a world where the rules of day-to-day reality do not apply. Actually, they are unknown. In Fairlie’s room, nature has been displaced by artifice. The Esquire’s rapturous appraisal of the “delightful Raffaello’s conception” is the best embodiment of this displacement, an endorsement of a conception of beauty that inevitably would put Fairlie at odds with the emergent Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. The plot of Collins’ *The Woman in White*, it is worth remembering, is set in the immediate years that lead to the Great Exhibition of 1851 with the novel’s third book being coetaneous to the hanging of Millais’ *Christ in the House of His Parents* during the Summer Exhibition of that very same year. Fairlie could well express his utmost admiration towards the model family depicted by Raphael. Collins’ merchant princes were about to revolutionise the practice of English painting with their purchases of Pre-Raphaelite works of art. The Esquire of Limmeridge House emerges from the pages of *The Woman in White* as an embodiment of the main tenets of a conception of aestheticism endorsed by the Royal Academy that was to suffer a serious, and quite fatal, blow as the mid-century progressed. The restricted, elitist conception of beauty enjoyed by the likes of Fairlie came under heavy pressure as the project of aesthetic democracy accelerated. But for the moment the Esquire could sit comfortably in the solitude of his room whilst momentous changes in art appreciation were taking place outside Limmeridge House. The dustmen rambling through the galleries of the South Kensington Museum were a nuisance unheard of in the isolated shores of Cumberland. But they would not be for long.

6.4 THE CULT OF BEAUTY

The kind of aestheticism embodied by Fairlie must be approached, I think, as a development of eighteenth-century discussions on the nature of taste. The Earl of Shaftesbury’s belief in the natural capacity of any human being to respond to beauty crucially shaped the development of English aesthetic thought in decades to come. Anthony Ashley Cooper posited his notion of *sensus communis* as the solution to the perilous social situation inherited from the

events of the second half of the seventeenth century.²¹⁶ Understood as a sense “of public weal, and of the common interest; love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or that sort of civility which rises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind” (Shaftesbury, *Characteristics* 1: 70), Shaftesbury built around this notion a philosophy that equated the moral sense inherent to any human being with the proceedings of virtuous taste or *gout*: “No sooner the eye opens upon figures, the ear to sounds, than straight the beautiful results and grace and harmony are known and acknowledged” (*Characteristics* 2: 137). Behind the *sensus communis* stood a Stoic idea of the social world as a priori condition necessary for the full development of men which naturally collided with notions of the mind as *tabula rasa*. Shaftesbury understood, as Tory criticism did, the chances for debauchery and libertinism lurking behind John Locke’s *Treatises* (1689). Consequently, the link between moral sense and aesthetic discernment emerged as a powerful antidote against the liberal policy supported by the Whigs.²¹⁷ If, according to the Earl of Shaftesbury, the mind always felt “the agreeable and disagreeable in the affections”, it was because the moral sense worked exactly as the aristocratic quality of taste through which the true connoisseur was able to find “a foul and fair, a harmonious and a dissonant, as really and truly here as in any musical numbers or in the outward forms or representations of sensible things” (*Characteristics* 1: 251). As a finding, it was certainly not a small one.

Shaftesbury’s philosophy was an attempt to cohere a society whose religious and political anchors had been heavily questioned during the political upheavals of the previous century. As the Earl stated in 1712, “when the free spirit of a nation turns itself” to the Arts “judgments are formed; critics arise; the public eye and ear improve” making possible “that reigning liberty and high spirit of a people, which from the habit of judging in the highest matters for themselves, makes them freely judge of other subjects, and enter into the characters as well of men manners, as the products or works of men, in art and science” (*Second*

²¹⁶ A consequence of the events surrounding the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a Whig—or liberal—political system of government was established “in which the authority of those appointed to govern the polity would in some sense flow from the consent of those over whose lives and fortunes they had been granted control” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 5).

²¹⁷ “For Locke”, writes Dowling, “had seemingly abandoned the great burden assumed by any political theory appealing to popular consent as the basis of civic authority: the task of showing that the citizenry is not a mere seething mass of irrational or egocentric desire” (*The Vulgarization of Art* 9-10).

Characters 22-23).²¹⁸ The Earl's mostly secular notion of a moral-aesthetic sense was perfectly suited for an age cut off from the certitudes of divine law. In a time when the social body trusted a government based on the consent of the governed, Shaftesbury hoped that, if the old law did not exert its powerful grasp upon the minds of the political subjects, then art would become its natural replacement. Salutory as his intention was, it nonetheless ended with the disastrous solipsism of the nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle*. But for a while it certainly stood ground, influencing many others along the way: "In opulent and commercial societies", Adam Smith wrote, "to think or to reason comes to be, like every other employment, a particular business, which is carried on by a very few people, who furnish the public with the thought and reason possessed by the vast multitudes that labour" (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 52). The men free from the burden of labour and with leisure enough at their disposal to devote it to intellectual pursuits formed the bulk of Smith's selected few. The eighteenth century connoisseur, the man whose exquisite taste set him apart from the ignorant crowd, was to exert a crucial role in the cultural life of the nation.²¹⁹ Smith's reflections, as those of Shaftesbury, were the product of a world where wealth and power—as well as the rule of taste—were concentrated in the hands of a small upper section of society who firmly believed that, if control upon their social inferiors was lost, everything would vanish. The development of aesthetic thought in England has to be placed against this background. As Terry Eagleton remarked, from the eighteenth century onwards "historically variable practices were being subsumed into some special, mysterious faculty known as the 'aesthetic', and a new breed of aestheticians sought to lay bare its innermost structures" (*Literary Theory* 18). The intricacies of that faculty were to be fully developed well advanced the nineteenth century by, perhaps, the most notorious aesthete of them all, Walter Pater.

²¹⁸ However, such position was far from being universally accepted. According to the author of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), Shaftesbury's aesthetic philosophy mirrored his upper-class upbringing: "A man that has been brought up in ease and affluence", Mandeville wrote, "if he is of a quiet indolent nature, learns to shun everything that is troublesome, and ... may in such happy circumstances have a better opinion of his inward state that it really deserves, and believe himself virtuous, because of his passions lie dormant" (qtd. in Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 16).

²¹⁹ See Reynolds, *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds* 129.

Maybe none exemplified better the complexities of the “aesthetic state” in the nineteenth century than Pater with his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873): “Beauty”, he wrote, “like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness” (3). Pater thought of each individual as an arbiter of taste by his own right. One’s own judgment, he firmly believed, was worthy enough to appreciate beauty without critical interpositions of any kind: “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?”, Pater crucially asked. “What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for oneself or not at all” (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 3).²²⁰ Crucially, Pater posited an appreciation of beauty thoroughly dependent on one’s own subjectivity. But his was a notion of aesthetic criticism of very limited reach, applying only to those willing “to enjoy what has been well done in art or poetry, to discriminate between what is more and what is less excellent in them, or to use words like beauty, excellence, art, poetry, with more meaning than they would otherwise have” (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 3). The ability to discriminate, therefore, defined the aesthetic critic and, conversely, the lack of it

²²⁰ Linda Dowling suggests as a possible source for Pater’s aesthetic view Matthew Arnold’s essay “Heinrich Heine” (1863). According to Arnold, “Goethe’s profound, imperturbable naturalism is absolutely fatal to all routine thinking; he puts the standard, once for all, inside every man instead of outside him; when he is told, such a thing must be so, there is immense authority and custom in favour of its being so, it has been held to be so for a thousand years, he answers with Olympian politeness, ‘But is it so? Is it so to me?’” (qtd. in Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 115).

meant the incapacity to appreciate artistic excellence.²²¹ For Pater, discrimination entailed a complex set of skills. The aesthetic critic, he argued, ought to be able to “distinguish, analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 4). Putting it more bluntly, he should understand *how* beauty worked. Art demanded a highly developed sensibility to be properly appreciated: “In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? Who was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste?” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 4). The aesthetic critic acted as a sort of shaman, capable of discerning what laid beneath the veil of mere appearance. However, no matter how Pater’s exquisite prose presented it, many remained suspicious of his take on the “aesthetic state”. Margaret Oliphant, in her unsigned review for *Blackwood Magazine*, accused Pater of being “removed from ordinary mankind by that ultra-culture and academical contemplation of the world as a place chiefly occupied by other beings equally cultured and refined, which ... forms an inner circle of Illuminati in almost every university” (qtd. in Seiler, *Walter Pater* 86).²²² Oliphant’s assessment, blunt as it

²²¹ Pater was writing on the wake of Matthew Arnold’s division of English society into “Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace” made in *Culture and Anarchy* (1867). Arnold, drawing heavily on August Renan, launched a passionate tirade in support of high culture as the only way of maintaining the cohesion of a society that, at least from his point of view, was on the verge of collapse: “It is of itself a serious calamity for a nation that its tone of feeling and grandeur of spirit should be lowered or dulled. But the calamity appears far more serious still when we consider that the middle classes, remaining as they are now, with their narrow, harsh, unintelligent, and unattractive spirit and culture, will almost certain fail to mould or assimilate the masses below them, whose sympathies are at the present moment actually wider and more liberal than theirs” (qtd. in Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 21). As Arnold saw it, the health of the social body of the country was in terminal state: “They arrive, these masses, eager to enter into possession of the world, to gain a more vivid sense of their own life and activity. In this their irrepressible development, their natural educators and initiators are those immediately above them, the middle classes. If these classes cannot win their sympathy or give them their direction, society is in danger of falling into anarchy” (qtd. in Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 21). Collins’ Unknown Public proved a force to be reckoned with as time went by, seemingly unmatched by a middle class ineffective to the point of Arnold positing a Hellenisation of sorts in order to avert a perilous social situation. It was the blatant lack of knowledge of the best which has been said and thought in the world that, according to Arnold, explained the sense of discomfort pervading the society of the time. To my mind, Fairlie’s effort with his art catalogue would have been greatly appreciated by Arnold.

²²² William Morris aversion to the doctrine of art for art’s sake echoed Oliphant’s criticism of Pater. According to Morris, human beings will not find any kind of salvation in “‘art for art’s sake ... of (which) a school ... does, in a way, theoretically at least, exist at present. Its watchword (is) a piece of slang that does not mean the harmless thing it seems to mean ... An art cultivated professedly by a few, and for a few, who would consider it necessary—a duty, if they could admit duties—to despise the common herd, to hold themselves aloof from all that the world has been struggling for from the first, to guard carefully every approach to their palace of art ... that art at last will seem too delicate a thing for even the hands of the initiated to touch; and the initiated must at last sit still and do nothing—to the grief of no one’” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 158).

was, still remains an accurate one. Pater's thought never went beyond those at the fountain-head of the humanities endowed by aesthetic discernment: "The beauty of art", he quoted straight from Johann Winckelmann, "demands a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature, because the beauty of art, like tears shed at play, gives no pain, is without life, and must be awakened and repaired by culture" (qtd. in Pater, *Studies on the History of the Renaissance* 94).²²³ And that higher sensibility was a treasured possession of few men. Pater's understanding of the aesthetic experience echoed Adam Smith's notion of a very selected number of people in charge of furnishing the public with the thought and reason they were devoid of. In the eighteenth century, it might have worked rather well. But the Victorian public was confident enough in their own capabilities to decide by themselves which thought, and which reason, best suited them. Pater, in the best aesthetic fashion, truly inhabited a world of his own creation. *The Renaissance*, as Oliphant quite rightly argued, was the result "of a limited atmosphere, comprehensible only in a narrow sphere, and, by the very peculiarities of their being, betraying the decay among us of all true and loving art" (qtd. in Seiler, *Walter Pater* 91).²²⁴ But that very limited atmosphere, Oliphant failed to realise, had been crucial to the ideal of aesthetic experience since Shaftesbury's disquisitions on the nature of taste. Indeed, it had

²²³ The whole quotation reeks of homoeroticism: "As it is confessedly the beauty of man which is to be conceived under one general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty in men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn, instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female. But the beauty of art demands a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature, because the beauty of art, like tears shed at play, gives no pain, is without life, and must be awakened and repaired by culture" (qtd. in Pater, *Studies on the History of the Renaissance* 94). A few years before the writing of Collins' *The Woman in White*, Pater published in the *Westminster Review* an article dealing with Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The article, which appeared in the 1857 January number of the *Review*, eventually became the final chapter of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).

²²⁴ Pater's "Conclusion", widely condemned because of its endorsement of hedonism and hints to homosexuality, was omitted in the second edition of the book. The core of the problem, according to the Rev. John Wordsworth, was the moral frivolity and debauchery proposed by Pater: "I cannot disguise from myself", wrote Wordsworth, "that that philosophy is an assertion that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite" (qtd. in Kimball, *Experiments against Reality* 38-39). For W. J. Courthope, the Aestheticism propounded by Pater was a mere literary version of the dangerous Liberalism running wild towards the last decades of the century.

been comprehensible only in a very narrow sphere. It always had and will be.²²⁵ The perils of an unbounded sensibility towards the beauty of art were perfectly embodied by Frederick Fairlie.

Victorian Aestheticism, I think, is often approached through the distorted lenses of *fin-de-siècle* Decadentism, an amalgam of sorts between the cult of beauty and dandyism whose similarities—for instance, a degree “of selfish irresponsibility ... ideally free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: passions, ambitions, politics or occupations” (Moers 13)—made the confusion likely to happen. To my mind, Collins’ Ralph in *Basil* (1852) foreshadowed Oscar Wilde’s late (and fatal) incarnation as a devotee of artifice. However, aestheticism in the mid-century, as depicted by Collins in *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), still remained attached to its original eighteenth century conception. Grace and harmony to fulfil the senses were as important to the Esquire of Limmeridge House as they had been for the Earl of Shaftesbury in the past. The cult of beauty remained alien to the cult of clothes for most of the nineteenth century and their practitioners quite at odds with each other. The dandy, instead of being a detached being of supreme knowledge as the aesthete, was thoroughly dependent on the very same society that he (apparently) despised. Henry James noticed this key feature of dandyism in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882): “Osmond lived exclusively for the world. Far from being its master, as he pretended to be, he was its very humble servant, and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success. He lived with his eye on it, from morning till night, and the world was so stupid it never suspected the trick” (345). Fashion, the core component of dandyism, required an audience clever enough to recognise the cultural codes implicit in the display of clothes. As a phenomenon, dandyism was eminently a social one: “I was always of an ambitious nature”, declared the dandy Pelham in the eponymous novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “and desirous of being distinguished from the ordinary herd” (62). But such distinction, nonetheless, conveyed a thorough submission to that herd. With good

²²⁵ According to Hamilton, “[t]he aesthetes even go so far as to decide what shall be considered beautiful, and those who do not accept their ruling are termed Philistines, and there is no hope for them” (vii). Pater’s legacy clearly proved a fruitful one. Twentieth century commentators drew heavily on Hamilton when approaching aestheticism. Elizabeth Aslin, in her classic book *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau* (1969), wrote of the Philistines as those “deficient in liberal culture whose interests were bounded by material and commonplace things as opposed to the high-minded spiritual and artistic values of the aesthetes” (14).

reason could James write of his “sterile dilettante” doing nothing better than “pose” (*The Portrait of a Lady* 345). The dandy’s carefully crafted persona was built to be admired. He was “a witness and living Martyr to the eternal Worth of Clothes” who asked in return “that you would recognise his existence; would admit him to be a living object; or even failing this, a visual object, or thing that will reflect rays of light” (Carlyle, *Sartor Resorts* 98). An *animal socialis* craving for recognition, the dandy gladly surrendered to a master without an identifiable face.²²⁶ The devotee to the cult of clothes was thoroughly opposed to the aesthete, that very special being “always sensitive, usually introverted and self-centered, often passive, and sometimes so capable of abstracting himself mentally from the world around him that he appears absentminded or ‘possessed’” (Beebe 5). Fairlie, as someone endowed by what Maurice Beebe called “artistic temperament”, found in the solitary contemplation of art the only reality worth living: “And – what next? Curious, is it not? I had a great deal more to say; and I appear to have quite forgotten it. Do you mind touching the bell? In that corner. Yes. Thank you” (Collins, *The Woman in White*: 44). Indeed, Fairlie’s absent-mindedness is a thorough one. Secluded in the remote shores of Cumberland where the sea opens “joyously under the broad August sunlight, and the distant coast of Scotland fringed the horizon with its lines of melting blue” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 30), the Esquire Fairlie stands aloof from the “stir and turmoil of a London street” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 420) where the dandy once thrived. The complete and absolute reification of oneself (*die Verdinglichung*) underscores the practice of dandyism. In this sense, little intention has Frederick Fairlie, as a truthful worshipper of the beautiful, of strolling around town with his “dark frock-coat ... much thinner than cloth” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39) to impress strangers. The Esquire of Limmeridge House is a “man of leisure bent upon personal cultivation alone” (Beebe 133-134) thoroughly uninterested in the showmanship implicit in the cult of fashion. As the dandy Pelham argues in Bulwer-Lytton’s eponymous novel, the purpose of dressing is “to fascinate others, not yourself” (64). The dandiacal predisposition to be reified, to be transformed into an object of admiration—“Do but look at him and he is contented” (Carlyle, *Sartor Resorts* 98)—nevertheless runs contrary to the practice of aestheticism as embodied by Frederick Fairlie. Sur-

²²⁶ And therefore embraced a life of shallowness by its lack of privacy. Hannah Arendt wrote extensively about the necessity of a private place that has to remain hidden “if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense” (171).

rounded by his collection of art treasures, the Esquire can put into practice his “highly-appreciative feeling towards Art and its professors” which is “the consolation and happiness of [his] suffering existence to cultivate” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 110). The great misfortune of his life, Fairlie contends, is the fact that nobody will let him alone to enjoy his art treasures at peace. Innocent as it may look, his request lies nonetheless at the core of aestheticism, characterised by a very peculiar understanding of time as a flux and the concomitant quest for certain moments to arrest it.²²⁷ Fairlie’s retreat from the concerns of daily life is a necessary step to take in order to gain a thorough comprehension of beauty. Collins’ aesthete is happy enough passing his days in the quietness of his room “reclining, with my art-treasures about me” (*The Woman in White* 346). Fairlie’s precious objects afford him an aesthetic pleasure never to be matched by the outside world. As an aesthete, the Esquire is “simply someone who sees” (qtd. in Freedman 10) in the definition provided by Swinburne, not someone *who is seen*—a crucial distinction. The dandy might well be “a Poet” who treats his body as “the (stuffed) parchment-skin whereon he writes, with cunning Huddersfield dyes, a Sonnet to his mistress’ eyebrow” (Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* 98). Apparel, and not art, was his main concern. The theatricals of dandyism did not extend to the practice of aestheticism: “We are all like the ancient actors”, asserts Pelham. “Let our faces be ever so beautiful, we must still wear a mask” (Bulwer-Lytton 171). Pelham’s audience, the ordinary herd, required him to do so. Aestheticism and dandyism, at least in their mid-century incarnation, were utterly opposed to each other.

To my mind, the kind of aestheticism embodied by the Esquire Fairlie in *The Woman in White* further reinforced Collins’ appeal to the people at large made in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) to reject the connoisseurs’ views on art and trust “entirely to their own common sense when they are looking at pictures” (193). Collins’ article, directed against the purchas-

²²⁷ However, Jonathan Freedman, as many other scholars in the field, cannot avoid the inevitable misapprehensions. To define the later phase of aestheticism as “that of the aesthete as a Dandy, as devotee of the finest of sensations and launcher of the most cutting of remarks” (49) is simply a distortion of historical facts. Again, the dandy was the apostle of clothes, not a mere devotee of “the most cutting of remarks”—that was consubstantial to his performance, not a core component of it. Freedman probably wrote these lines with the dandies of Wilde’s plays in mind, but they were an extreme (and late) outcome of the very peculiar amalgam of aestheticism and dandyism that happened in France during the mid-century.

ing policy of the National Gallery, was meant as a rebuttal of the highbrow conception of art being imposed upon the general public by a very selected circle of judges: “Let us ... say plainly once for all, that the sort of High Art which is professedly bought *for us*, and which does actually address itself to nobody but painters, critics and connoisseurs, is not High Art at all, but the lowest of the Low” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197). Dismissing the kind of High Art endorsed by the likes of Fairlie in 1856 was relatively easy for Collins, with the Art Treasures Exhibition about to open its doors in Manchester for the better benefit of those excluded from a rule of taste still held by a bunch of “painters, critics and connoisseurs”. Soon people devoid of the most elemental criteria in matters of art were to have a chance of forming an opinion by themselves relying on their own common sense. However, Collins, setting the plot of *The Woman in White* at the very beginning of the 1850s, depicted a world where the haughty connoisseurs who had been preaching the immeasurable value of old paintings for decades thought entitled to keep doing so: “You will find your position here, Mr Hartright, properly recognised”, admonishes Fairlie. “There is none of the horrid English barbarity of feeling about the social position of an artist, in this house. So much of my early life has been passed abroad, that I have quite cast my insular skin in that respect” (*The Woman in White* 41). Fairlie had good reasons to reassure Hartright of his value as an artist with Limeridge House being free from the detestable gentry of the neighbourhood, those “who would have opened they eyes in astonishment, if they had seen Charles the Fifth pick up Titian’s brush for him” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 41).²²⁸ They might well do. But in a few years ignorant eyes like these were deemed important enough to mount a gigantic exhibition of art treasures for their better benefit. As the mid-century was drawing to a close, barbarians in the knowledge of art, more than an object of pity, were a force to be reckoned with. For connoisseurs like William Beckford, the upcoming aesthetic threat was unmistakable.

Writing in 1841 about the possibility of selling Perugino’s *Madonna and Child*, Beckford reflected upon the changes suffered by the art market in recent times: “Now greatly I should prefer learning the Perugino has found its proper place in Crewe Hall instead of some upstart or refurbished mansion of Mr Holforth”, he wrote. “That poor rich man has *nothing* in

²²⁸ Fairlie’s extensive knowledge of the Italian Renaissance pays off: the anecdote is taken from Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1568), a seminal book on the subject.

him but money—Nature has not endowed him with taste—and as he most resolutely chooses to be his own teacher he will never acquire *knowledge*” (qtd. in Davis, *Victorian Patrons of the Arts* 14). Beckford’s misapprehensions ran deep: “It is mortifying such a shallow pated, *half witted*, but thoroughly conceited fake connoisseur should be admitted even to the sight of a picture he is too prosaic to comprehend or value” (qtd. in Davis, *Victorian Patrons of the Arts* 14). It might be mortifying, but also inevitable. The likes of Mr Holforth thrived because of capitalist development and its concomitant spread of wealth. Beckford and those who searched for enlightenment through the contemplation of beauty found to their astonishment as the years went by how their authority in matters of taste was disputed by a bunch of ignorant newcomers who, devoid of the most elemental aesthetic education, were nonetheless eager enough to spend as much money as necessary in the acquisition of works of art. Noel Vanstone in Collins’ *No Name* (1862) best embodies this type. Owning quite a remarkable collection of art treasures, Vanstone—“[a] frail, flaxen-haired, self-satisfied little man, clothed in a fair white dressing-gown, many sizes too large from him, with a nosegay of violets drawn neatly through the button-hole over his breast” (Collins, *No Name* 281)—approaches his acquisitions from a pecuniary perspective from which Beckford, a thoroughbred aesthete, would have recoiled in earnest.²²⁹ But Vanstone, a “self-satisfied little man”, exemplifies a new reality. Men not endowed with taste by Nature multiplied as the mid-century advanced. Some of them were rich, and many relatively poor, but they shared a conviction in the validity of their own aesthetic opinions that did not take into consideration the authority of well-established teachers in matters of art. Mid-century England saw a turning point in the history of aestheticism: the moment when the aesthete, that “rare and superior being, capable of acts of special perception and appreciation” (Freedman 49), began to be considered irrelevant by a society increasingly confident in its own capabilities for aesthetic discrimination. Men devoted to the cult of beauty had no place in a commercial society like that of the 1850s. However, if Beckford’s reluctantly accepted the rise of fake connoisseurs, the Esquire Fairlie embarked in a doomed attempt to influence the tide of aesthetic democracy growing around Limmeridge

²²⁹ About thirty to five-and-thirty years old, Vanstone has a peculiar complexion “delicate as a young girl’s, his eyes were of the lightest blue, his upper lip was adorned by a weak little white moustache, waxed and twisted at either end into a thin spiral curl when any object specially attracted his attention, he half closed his eyelids to look at it. When he smiled, the skin at his temples crumpled itself into a nest of wicked little wrinkles” (Collins, *No Name* 281).

House. The barbarians of the Institution at Carlisle might well join one day the ranks of Mr Holforth or Noel Vanstone. Foolish as Fairlie's intention was, by no means should be ignored. The Esquire was after all a man whose "highly-appreciative feeling towards art and its professors, which is the consolation and happiness of Mr Fairlie's suffering existence to cultivate, could be easily shaken" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 110). As indeed it was to be as time went by.

6.5 THE MILLION'S TASTE

At the very start of the mid-century, men like the linen draper Mr Sherwin in Collins' *Basil* (1852) were no longer idle spectators waiting to be told how to approach works of art. On the contrary, they bestowed, or were in the process of bestowing, enough authority on themselves to decide what kind of art best suited their interests. And it was not precisely one that relied on the beautiful. Therefore, for those concerned about the debasement of the rule of taste that grew alongside capitalist development, to provide a better understanding of what beauty meant became of paramount importance as the century advanced. If aesthetic education was improved, so the belief went in the best eighteenth-century fashion, better citizens were to follow. Consequently, for those "who pride themselves upon having found what is the really beautiful in nature and art" (Hamilton vii), as Frederick Fairlie does in *The Woman in White*, the situation was a tricky one. It was all too well to set a standard of taste amongst a selected group of connoisseurs with the knowledge required to decode the language of beauty. But the unstoppable rise of the middle class created enormous tensions about the very same nature of the beautiful that questioned the validity of previous aesthetic standards. Collins set the plot of *The Woman in White* by the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851. As I argued before, the Crystal Palace erected at London's Hyde Park was intended to be a celebration of the extraordinary industrial progress made by England in recent decades. Showcasing an impressive range of industrial commodities, the event proved a resounding success that cemented the country's reputation as a global power and prompted the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition a few years later. Both events were much needed in a time when the coarsening of taste was concomitant to the increase of the reading public: "The lowering of all standards", as Auer-

bach pointed out, “was further accelerated by the commercial exploitation of the tremendous demand for reading matter on the part of the publishers of books and periodicals, the majority of whom (there were exceptions) followed the path of least resistance and easy profits, supplying the public with what it wanted and possibly even with worse than it would have demanded if left to its own devices” (501). That reading public, barely literate enough, had recently migrated from the countryside to the expanding industrial centres of commerce.²³⁰ Little, if nothing, could be expected from those toiling with the labour of their hands. Auerbach’s lowering of standards, however, was far from limited to the printed word: “Now you have made Art one of the wants of the public”, Thackeray wrote right at the beginning of the 1840s, “you will find the providers of the commodity and its purchasers grow more refined in their tastes alike” (“Letters on the Fine Arts. Nº2” 210). But that refinement, when applied to a new class of consumers devoid of the most elemental aesthetic understanding, proved quite peculiar to say the least. Not a small number of people were horrified by what the public wanted.

The Art Union of London is a case in point. Drawn on the model of the German *Kunst-Verein*, the association, which promised an annual engraving of a painting to its members, started with around 700 subscribers in 1839 to reach 15,000 ten years later. It soon met with fierce opposition: “The motive of the subscriber is of no consequence, so long as others have to dispose of the money”; complained *The Athenaeum*, “but the Art Union proposes that each subscriber ‘shall select for himself’. Now, is it not certain that such patronage must tend to degrade Art?” (qtd. in Thackeray, “Letters on the Fine Arts. Nº 1” 200). Left to their own devices, and devoid of any guidance in matters of taste, nothing good could be expected from the Art Union’s subscribers: “Many men of genius will say, ‘No; we do not want the applause of the vulgar; give us the opinion of the few.’ Who prevents them? They *have* those few as

²³⁰ In this reading public Auerbach saw the seeds of the bourgeois or “the creature whose stupidity, intellectual inertia, conceit, hypocrisy, and cowardice were attacked and ridiculed by poets, writers, artists, and critics from the romantic period ... Day in and day out he led a life which was much more dynamic and exciting than the life of the élite, with their routine of idleness and their almost complete immunity from the pressure of time and duty, who represented the literary public of the *ancien régime*” (501-502). However, the nineteenth century reading public, I think, was far too complex to be labelled under a single term.

before; but because the artist of a lower walk changes his patron, and instead of catering for the private boxes, appeals to the pit there is no harm done", Thackeray argued. "The pit, it is my firm belief, knows just as much about the matter in question as the boxes know" ("Letters on the Fine Arts. N°2" 210). In the immediate years previous to the mid-century, the vulgar's point of view in aesthetic matters turned out to be as relevant as that of those in possession of an instructed eye. Or so Thackeray argued. Maybe he truly believed that the friends of genius were to be found amongst the rudest and ignorant, and not in aristocratic circles.²³¹ Maybe he thought exactly the opposite. Thackeray's customary mordacity makes any interpretation possible. *The Athenaeum*, nonetheless, avoided ambiguity: "When every individual, be he whom he may, is allowed to follow his own judgment in the disposal of his prize-money, the best results can be but an irresponsible indulgence of individual whim and caprice—the worst and certain in the degradation of Art" (qtd. in Thackeray, "Letters on the Fine Arts. N° 1" 200). It was indeed a bleak view, but thoroughly supported by Collins' story of modern life. The account made of Basil's visit to suburbia was telling enough: "The paper, the curtains, the carpet glared on you; the books, the wax-flowers in glass cases, the chairs in flaring chintz-covers, the china plates on the door, the blue and pink glass vases and cups ranged on the chimney-piece, the over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves—all glared on you" (Collins, *Basil* 53-54). Suburbia confirmed the degradation of Art hinted by the conservative magazine: any individual following his own aesthetic judgment was thoroughly incapable of worthy results. Mr Sherwin's living room, a temple devoted to the shining newness of mass-produced cheap commodities, stands in marked contrast with Frederick Fairlie's abode where a light "deliciously soft, mysterious, and subdued ... fell equally upon all the objects in the room; it helped to intensify the deep silence, and the air of profound seclusion that possessed the place" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39). At Limmeridge House, nothing is oppressively new, nothing hurts the eye, the glare of industrial commodities having not yet reached the shores of Cumberland. The decoration of Fairlie's room reflects an approach towards art that values uniqueness and refinement,

²³¹ In 1843 Thackeray trusted "the people of England ... to be better patrons of art than the English aristocracy ever were ... The aristocracy never acknowledged the existence of Art in this country, for they never acknowledged the artist ... but what have done for Art to honour it? No, no; *they* are not the friends of genius. That day is over; its friends lie elsewhere; rude and cultivated as yet, but hearty, generous, and eager" ("Letters on the Fine Arts. N°2" 208). Thackeray's ingrained irony allows for a multiplicity of interpretations.

proof of the extraordinary connoisseurship of its owner, truly a collector in the sense given by Walter Benjamin, someone “who always displays some traits of the fetishist and who, through his possession of the artwork, shares in its cultic power” (“The Work of Art” 272). Actually, in quite a remarkable way, such is the extreme aestheticism of the Esquire that his ownership extends to human beings: “So glad to possess you at Limmeridge, Mr Hartright”, Fairlie remarks (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Having bought his services as teacher of drawing, the Esquire thinks of Hartright as another possession to treat according to his wishes: “Reification”, Bewes writes, “refers to the moment that a process or relation is generalised into an abstraction and thereby turned into a ‘thing’” (4). Fairlie’s patronising attitude, to my mind, easily falls into that description. The Esquire very consciously obliterates any trace of empathy in his dealings with the drawing master, aware as he is of the unequal relationship established between them. Following Bewes, reification “is closely allied to the process of alienation, objectification, and the fetishism of commodities, in which ‘the definite relation between men themselves [assumes] the fantastic form of a relation between things’” (4). But that equal relation between workers toiling under the weight of capitalism does not exactly apply to Fairlie and Hartright, the former having a perfect understanding of his patronage upon the young draughtsman. Secluded in his cabinet of art treasures, and gleefully interpreting to his best convenience the unwritten rules of social intercourse, the Esquire has reduced Hartright to the status of a mere commodity. The latter is considered as a sort of useful tool, not very different from the brushes employed by Fairlie in the cleaning of his coins, and lacking the aesthetic quality of a work of art. To my mind, Hartright’s humanity does not grant him that privilege. As Benjamin pointed out, crucial to the collector is his thorough awareness of the object’s aura. Indeed, the Esquire’s art treasures are bestowed with a sense of the past that allows them to be approached as something more than mere things. Benjamin’s cultic power only accentuates this understanding of the sacredness of the object subtly hinted by “the air of profound seclusion” noticed by Hartright. Fairlie’s room, a shrine devoted to Art, stands in marked contrast to the mere catalogue of aesthetic monstrosities that is Mr Sherwin’s abode. That the objects thought by the linen draper as worthy enough to showcase his social status were approached as mere rubbish by an appreciator of the beautiful was further

proof of the far-reaching consequences of the commodification of culture in mid-century England.

To assert, as Thackeray did, that both “the providers of the commodity as its purchasers grow more refined in their tastes alike” was, at worst, wishful thinking. Art might well be one of the wants of the public, but refinement, if there was any, proved elusive enough to find. However, at least on paper, many heartily agreed with Thackeray: “Society grows more cultivated”, can be read in *A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition* (1857). “It demands more and more as much beauty in things of daily use as can be infused into them” (5). But what society at large understood by beauty proved a contentious matter as time went by. The social body of the country had been transformed due to the incredible spread of capitalist development and art appreciation suffered accordingly: “Untrained to the appreciation of old pictures, too honest to affect a taste he does not possess, the middle class picture buyer seeks for work which represent the scenes he knows ... the faces and manners of his own time. He is no archeologist. He cannot throw himself back in imagination to the days when a whole city broke into rejoicing over the installation of a Madonna” (*A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings* 14). Men like Beckford or Frederick Fairlie were thoroughly unconcerned by “the faces and manners of his own time”, the latter having dedicated his whole life to the appreciation of old pictures like the “delightful Raffaello’s conception” that presides over his room. Fairlie was indeed an archeologist whose restrictive and exclusive understanding of taste grew increasingly outdated as the mid-century progressed and, crucially, suffered a serious blow when wealthy industrialists started supporting young artists in their quest for a new aesthetic language suitable to their interests. Pre-Raphaelitism, as already pointed out, owed its subexistence to the buyer that emerged alongside capitalist development. The project of aesthetic democracy reached a turning point in the 1850s, with the governmental policy of training the “most uneducated eye” prompting the creation of the South Kensington Museum and later leading to the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition. Far from being an issue limited to wealthy connoisseurs, aesthetic education was a public concern when *The Woman in White* began serialisation in 1859, the authority of arbiters of taste increasingly on the wane. Collins, who to his credit was perfectly aware of the changing times

he was living in, was adamant in his opposition to any aesthetic rule imposed by those high above in the social ladder:

I have seen such exceptional works by ones and twos, amid many hundreds of utterly worthless canvasses with undeservedly famous names attached to them, in Italy and elsewhere. My valet de place has not pointed them out to me; my guide-book, which criticises according to authority, has not recommended me to look at them, except in very rare cases indeed. I discovered them by myself, and others may discover them as readily as I did, if they will take out their minds of leading-strings when they enter a gallery, and challenge a picture boldly to do its duty by explaining its own merits to them without the assistance of an interpreter. ("To Thought, or Be Thought For" 197)

Provided these others got rid of deeply rooted prejudices and trusted their own opinions in matters of art, Collins argued, then gone was the need for interpreters of any kind: "I discovered them by myself, and others may discover them as readily as I did". Decades later Walter Pater was to appeal to the very same independence of thought when judging works of art— although, crucially, limited to a very selected number of cultured and refined beings. An article like Collins' "To Thought, or Be Thought For" (1856), with its questioning of the arbiters of taste, would have been unthinkable barely a few decades before. Collins well knew that, when challenging a picture boldly to do its duty, the public attending a gallery were also challenging the authority of men like Frederick Fairlie. People untrained in the appreciation of old pictures and bold enough to assert their right to judge by themselves posited quite a serious threat for the likes of the Esquire of Limmeridge House. If left to its own devices, the rampant democratisation of taste sweeping mid-century England could well lead to a new standard of the beautiful. And that was reason enough for Fairlie to act no matter how wretched the state of his nerves were.

The Esquire's contribution to the convoluted plot of *The Woman in White* is made not without effort: "The last annoyance that has assailed me is the annoyance of being called to write this Narrative", Fairlie complains. "Is a man in my state of nervous wretchedness capable of writ-

ing narratives?” (345). Probably not, but the events concerning his niece’s marriage to a psychotic baronet and posterior entrapment in a lunatic asylum do indeed require Fairlie’s collaboration. However, it does not come easily: “I am threatened, if I fail to exert myself in the manner required, with consequences which I cannot so much think of, without perfect prostration. There is really no need to threaten me. Shattered by my miserable health and my family troubles, I am incapable of resistance. If you insist, you take your unjust advantage of me; and I give way immediately” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 345). Fairlie’s equanimity is indeed a remarkable one bearing in mind his shattered physical and mental condition. Following his own account, by the time of the events that led to Laura Fairlie’s incarceration he was busy enough in a task of the utmost importance:

At the end of June, or the beginning of July, then, I was reclining, in my customary state, surrounded by the various objects of Art which I have collected about me to improve the taste of the barbarous people in my neighbourhood. That is to say, I had the photographs of my pictures, and prints, and coins, and so forth, all about me, which I intend, one of these days, to present (the photographs, I mean, if the clumsy English language will let me mean anything)—to present to the Institution at Carlisle (horrid place!), with a view to improving the tastes of the Members (Goths and Vandals to a man). (Collins, *The Woman in White* 346)

Fairlie’s photographs were indeed the outcome of hazardous work: “His last caprice has led him to keep two photographers incessantly employed in producing sun-pictures of all the treasures and curiosities in his possession”, Marian Halcombe tells the reader. “One complete copy of the collection of the photographs is to be presented to the Mechanic’s Institution of Carlisle, mounted on the finest cardboard, with ostentatious red-letter inscriptions underneath” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 201). However, the task ahead is to be considerably delayed by the sheer amount of Fairlie’s art treasures: “Dozens of photographs of this sort, and all inscribed in this manner, were completed before I left Cumberland; and hundreds more remain to be done”, Halcombe adds. “With this new interest to occupy him, Mr Fairlie will be a happy man for months and months to come; and the two unfortunate photographers will share the social martyrdom which he has hitherto inflicted on his valet alone” (Collins, *The*

Woman in White 202). Indeed, it is a martyrdom that promises to last long bearing in mind the numerous works of art owned by the Esquire. To Fairlie belongs, amongst others, a Madonna and Child by Raphael, a copper coin from the Sumerian king Tiglath Piliser, and a “unique Rembrandt etching ... known all over Europe, as *The Smudge*, from a printer’s blot in the corner which exists in no other copy” which is “valued at three hundred guineas” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 201-202).²³² And the reason for so much trouble? An educational programme of sorts for the better improvement of the barbarians’ taste. Indeed, for a man who “had been, or had fancied himself to be, an invalid for years past” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 128) such a sudden outburst of interest towards his social inferiors is, to say the least, quite surprising. Surprising, but maybe comprehensible when thinking about the quite peculiar environment of the 1850s. As Janet Minihan wrote about the mid-century, “[w]hile some people clung to the arts as the final prop of an allegedly embattled upper-class culture others regarded them as the only means of bridging the widening gulf between rich and poor” (x). Fairlie, clinging to that understanding of the arts as an exclusive property of those high above in the social ladder, nonetheless attempted, paradoxically, if not to bridge that wide gulf, at least to shorten the distance. That he did so through the medium of photography, keeping a cautionary distance from his social inferiors, clearly characterises his very particular gesture: “It might be supposed”, Fairlie complained, “that a gentleman who was in course of conferring a great national benefit on his countrymen, was the last gentleman in the world to be unfeelingly worried about private difficulties and family affairs. Quite a mistake, I assure you, in my case” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 346). Actually, no matter how carefully he worded his attempt, the Esquire’s was indeed a condescending attitude that fell short of the real national benefit being conferred by those collectors who willingly opened their private collections to the public. As W. H. Wills quite cleverly pointed out when reviewing the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, for a long time those dictating the rule of taste had fenced off their art treasures from the common herd, firmly believing that beauty was not a commodity to be traded upon—“they locked it up; would admit only a chosen few to a share of their enjoyment, and even those under stringent conditions and vigilant surveillance” (“The Manchester

²³² Collins had shown an early appreciation of Rembrandt when he praised his “marvellous knowledge of light and shade” (“The Pictures-Galleries of England” 348).

School of Art” 349). But theirs was a sense of exclusivity eroded by the appearance of conceited fake connoisseurs. Not all the proprietors of galleries had Beckford’s sense of entitlement when dealing with the likes of Mr Holforth. Shallow pated men with nothing in them but money were increasingly demanding to be taken into consideration when approaching works of art. And it did not take long for the populace to follow suit. Fairlie might well see the outcome of his actions as a magnanimous gift “to be presented to the Mechanic’s Institution of Carlisle”. However, Collins, who had immediately realised the radical steps taken by the owners of private galleries back at the very beginning of his literary career, well knew where the real value of a national benefit such as the democratisation of the beautiful lie.

In his series of articles “The Picture-Galleries of England” (1851) for *Bentley’s Miscellany*, Collins reflected upon the radical transformation of the nature of art collecting, from a private and restricted one to another public and accessible, noticeable at the very beginning of the 1850s—and coetaneous, therefore, to the events narrated in *The Woman in White*. Lord Ellesmere’s gallery—“one of the finest collections of ancient pictures in the world”—had recently granted free access to the public “admitting them by tickets, which they may easily obtain at any printseller’s” (Collins, “The Picture-Galleries of England” 1: 79).²³³ And it was far from being an exceptional case. Northumberland House and Syon House, the Dulwich Gallery or Mr Holford’s Collection of Pictures, all of them had their doors opened to the general public, showcasing an impressive array of art objects that surprised Collins during his visits.²³⁴ The sheer size of the collection amassed by private patrons was indeed remarkable: “Rich cabinets, vases, tables, silks, satins, and brocades, precious ‘curiosities,’ and charming little mantel-pieces ornaments, [which] surround us on all sides—everything is luxurious, and everything is in good taste” (Collins, “The Picture-Galleries of England” 2: 168). Collins was

²³³ Collins wrongly credited Lord Ellesmere’s private gallery for being the very first one opened to the public. Actually, it was Sir John Fleming Leicester, who, in 1818, first opened to the public a private collection of paintings. His was a bold decision in a time when the government of the nation, as the *Examiner* put it, did not spend “a guinea in furtherance of British genius in Painting” (qtd. in Minihan 20).

²³⁴ Dulwich Gallery became the first major public gallery in London in 1814 after Sir Peter Francis Bourgeois bequeathed his art collection to Dulwich College. Two years later the Viscount Fitzwilliam left his impressive collection of books, paintings and engravings to Cambridge University—a bequest that formed the basis for the future Fitzwilliam Museum.

thoroughly supportive of this new understanding of patronage as oriented towards the greater national benefit: “I strongly recommend any owners of fine pictures, who may be obstinate enough, in spite of all rebuffs, to leave their collection to the nation”, he wrote, “to follow the example of Sir Francis Bourgeois, and leave the money to build a gallery, with the pictures, otherwise the nation will play at hide-and-seek with their works of art, as usual, either in the cellars of the National Gallery, or in the dark sitting-rooms of Marlborough House!” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 3: 345). Indeed, some owners of fine pictures were protective of their collections. The Marquis of Westminster’s art treasures were of difficult access “because that nobleman has as yet but half followed the good example of others, by only admitting to his Collection those who can gain a personal introduction to him”, Collins wrote. “Let us hope that he will learn some day to put as much kindly faith in the trustworthiness and honour of the public as others of his order!” (“The Picture-Galleries of England” 1: 79). Upon such example, that of facilitating the encounter of the public with works of art, rested the Art Treasures Exhibition. Strolling around the gigantic glass pavilion built in the outskirts of Manchester, W. H. Wills immediately realised the democratic approach towards art of a new breed of connoisseurs. Instead of locking beauty up in an ivory tower, they were proudly departing from it—temporarily, that is—for the better amelioration of the aesthetic education of the uninstructed eye. The Manchester event was made possible by their support. Contrary to their fathers, Wills argued, these connoisseurs firmly believed that the real value of their art treasures rested not on confinement, but on a wider appreciation of them. It was indeed a radical departure from previous decades, although one heralded by the opening of private collections already noticed by Collins back in 1851 and that clearly never reached the remote shores of Cumberland where Frederick Fairlie recoiled in earnest from the mere thought of the populace invading the quietness of Limmeridge House. As John Stuart Mill wrote, “[c]ultivation, to be carried beyond a certain point, requires leisure; that is the natural attribute of a hereditary aristocracy; that such a body has all the means of acquiring intellectual and moral superiority; and he needs be at no loss to endow them with abundant motives to it” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 68). To Frederick Fairlie applies Mill’s understanding of hereditary aristocracy as a very particular branch of the social body whose way of living was thoroughly dependent upon the exploitation of the land by the bulk of tenant farmers. Free from the

slavery of work, the upper classes could well devote their time to the pursuit of cultured leisure in the way proposed by Coleridge and Carlyle. Which is exactly what the Esquire does. One amongst the landed aristocrats of the country, Fairlie enjoys a life devoted to aesthetic appreciation without the inconvenience of having to earn a living as the drawing master Walter Hartright does—or, for that matter, those attending the Institution at Carlisle. Whether Mill, always the practical man, ever thought of aestheticism as a side effect of his ideal of cultivation is a matter of pure speculation. However, there is no doubt that as the mid-century advanced leisure went from being a coveted luxury for a few to a relatively popular one. The factory workers strolling around the Art Treasures Exhibition posited a stark departure from the farm labourers with little time left for reading as rendered by Charles Kingsley in *Yeast* (1848). Had *The Woman in White* been set in 1857, Fairlie might have submitted some of his art treasures to the Manchester event. But Collins, setting the plot of his novel in the years surrounding the Great Exhibition, forced the Esquire to reach the barbarous people of his neighbourhood through the only way possible: a photographic catalogue of “the various objects of Art” in his possession. Fairlie’s deeply engrained aestheticism prevented any admission of the ignorant populace into the innermost recesses of Limmeridge House. His collection of sun-pictures might well be a selfish dilettante’s caprice but to my mind there is no doubt of its political purpose: to exert some influence of sorts upon the Goths and Vandals of the Institution at Carlisle. At the very beginning of the mid-century, when not even the South Kensington Museum had been built, such idea was still a feasible one. And, more importantly, could be put into practice from the safety of an ivory tower. The Esquire was indeed lucky enough to live in a time when the medium of photography allowed him to educate those devoid of the most elemental knowledge of art whilst keeping a cautionary distance. Limmeridge House was to remain undisturbed by the detestable gentry of the neighbourhood. Others could well open their doors to the barbarians. Fairlie was doing enough with his catalogue of art treasures.

The Esquire’s use of the photographic process available at the time in order to catalogue his art treasures was a relative novelty. The Arundel Society, founded a year before the start of the events narrated in *The Woman in White*, intended, according to Ruskin, to familiarise the Eng-

lish public “through the medium of chromo-lithography ... with the severe and purer styles of earlier art” in order to “divert the public taste from works that were meretricious and puerile, and elevate the tone of our national School of Painting and Sculpture” (qtd. in Sambrook 4).²³⁵ Inspired by the connoisseur Earl of Arundel (1585-1646), members of the society included, besides Ruskin, the Middle-East archeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard who famously excavated the palace of Tiglath-Piliser, the same Assyrian king whose face is stamped in one of Fairlie’s coins, in what he thought to be the biblical Nineveh. Layard exhibited many of his findings in the Hyde Park Exhibition of 1851 to great acclaim.²³⁶ The publication of *Niniveh and its Remains* (1849) was followed by *Discoveries in the Ruins of Niniveh and Babylon* (1853), the very same year of his meeting with Collins in Naples when the latter was visiting the place with Dickens.²³⁷ As far as I know, if never in intimate terms, both Layard and Collins kept themselves within sight of each other. It is impossible to ascertain to what extent Collins knew of the activities of the Arundel Society but a fair amount of knowledge has to be taken for granted. By the time of composition of *The Woman in White* the society was enough established to keep a collaboration of sorts with the South Kensington Museum. In the *Price List of Reproductions of Works of Art*, published in 1860 by the Committee of Council on Education, Department of Science and Art, figures a small ad under the heading “The Publications of the Arundel Society for promoting the Knowledge of Art, 24, Old Bond Street, London”. According to the *Price List* that I consulted at the British Library, “the collection of specimens exhibited in the Photograph and Reproductions room of the Science and Art Department fully illustrates the nature of the operations of the Society, the publications of which

²³⁵ “The method of record was by watercolour facsimiles, of astonishing fidelity, made by various artists specially commissioned by the Society, which were reproduced for subscribers by the process of chromo-lithography” (Steezman, *The Rule of Taste* 74). It was precisely the reliance on chromo-lithography that prompted the dissolution of the Arundel Society by common consent of its members. The official reason was the accomplishment of its objectives, although in reality chromo-lithographs had gone out of fashion by the end of the century.

²³⁶ Layard’s discoveries soon permeated Victorian popular imagination as reflected by Stone’s article “The Niniveh Bull” (1851) for *Household Words*: “I was borne down beside my own ancient river”, tells the bull, “amidst strange voices and shouts—‘Layard!—Layard!’ they seemed to cry. I saw my country desolate, my dwelling a prey to strangers, I was tossed many days on the heaving waters. Now I stand in strange land, the wonder of earth’s younger children” (469). The anonymous author, which fills the piece with quite a number of classical references, is referring to one of the several winged bulls nowadays on exhibition in the Assyrian gallery at the British Museum.

²³⁷ According to William Baker’s reconstruction of Wilkie Collins’ library, he owned an edition of Layard’s *Niniveh* inscribed 1852. See Baker 18.

may obtained on payment of an annual subscription of one guinea” (38).²³⁸ Collins wrote *The Woman in White* in a time when the work of art, if not fully accessible to all kinds of public, was no longer restricted to a supercilious elite. For those unable to attend the free Monday admission offered by the Kensington institution, photographs provided an invaluable approach to art treasures. The mid-century experienced a slow, but crucial, commodification of highbrow culture that reflected the social mobility underway and photography, no matter how questionable its quality was at this very early stage, proved to be a fundamental ally in the ongoing battle for aesthetic democracy.

Indeed, the new photographic science promised to revolutionise the way people approached the work of art. Mid-century commentators immediately understood the far-reaching consequences of the new medium: “She is made for the present age, in which the desire for art resides in a small minority, but the craving, or rather necessity, for cheap, prompt, and correct facts in the public at large”, Lady Eastlake wrote in 1857. “Photography is the purveyor of such knowledge to the world. She is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view” (465). Indeed, William Henry Fox Talbot did not lose time in satisfying that necessity. Truly a polymath, Talbot got the idea of exposing a sheet coated with nitrate of silver creating in this way the calotype (or Talbotype). If Daguerre’s process only resulted in one single and expensive image impossible to reproduce, Talbot laid the grounds for the photographic negative from where multiple copies could be taken. And when that happened, when easy-to-get photographic reproductions were available, traditional approaches to great works of art were challenged: “An art which, like photography lives by the patronage of the million”, wrote presciently Lord Salisbury in the mid-century, “will adapt itself to the million’s taste” (qtd. in Steegman, *The Rule of Taste* 279). Painting had traditionally been constrained by its very particular nature, a physical encounter with the canvas being required in order to fully apprehend its qualities. But as years went by new photographic processes were developed that could render more accurate images. Talbot’s innovation was only the beginning, Archer’s collodion process soon to come. The popularisation of photography heralded a new kind of patronage

²³⁸ The photographs on exhibition proved quite a success: “The orders received for Photographs, and registered for execution in rotation, are now so numerous as to render it impossible to fix any period within which orders transmitted after this date can be executed” making necessary to meet the demand “as far as possible, in strict rotation” (*Price List* 1).

no longer dependent on a rich merchant or landlord, but on the million's taste. The world depicted by Collins in *Hide and Seek* (1854), where visitors from "almost every variety of rank in the social scale" (185) mingled in Mr Blyth's studio in order to see for themselves his latest painting, would not last long. For those attentive enough, like Collins with his "The Unknown Public" (1858), signs were telling of the upcoming patronage of the million instead of aristocrats versed in the subtle intricacies of art. And this was a kind of patronage not without challenges: "The painter", Ruskin wrote as the mid-century was drawing to an end, "will have to content himself with being as undistinguished as an author, and must be satisfied in this unpraised usefulness" (*Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture* 276). The mechanical reproduction of the work of art loomed heavily in the air.²³⁹ Towards the end of the century, strolling around the suburbs of the capital, the art critic Gleeson White noticed how irreversible the debasement of High Art had become when spotting Botticelli's *Primavera* "in most of the drawing-rooms" side by side with "reproductions by all sorts of processes, from chromolithography to the meanest half-tone ... scattered every-where" (qtd. in Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Taste* 116). White's aesthetic sensibility was shocked to the core. It was better, he concluded, "to smile at the craze, and convey an idea that an undue fondness for Botticelli denotes a lack of sympathy for real master-work" (qtd. in Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Taste* 116). It might well be lack of sympathy, but it also denoted the complete and absolute success of the project of aesthetic democracy launched during the mid-century in which new photographic processes, to my mind, played a fundamental part. White had good reasons to be worried about: "Around 1900", Walter Benjamin wrote, "technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes" ("The Work of Art" 253). The amount of *Primaveras* displayed in the drawing-rooms of suburbia confirmed the accuracy Benjamin's analysis. In the fight between two diametrically opposed conceptions of art, one "for the masses, [and] the other for the 'happy few'" (Beebe 24), the former won. However, that victory, which implied the defeat of the highbrow aestheticism

²³⁹ Ruskin mentioned again this problematic in the addenda to *The Political Economy of Art* (1857): "We are too much in the habit, in these days, of acting as if Art worth a price in the market were a commodity which people could be generally taught to produce, and as if the *education* of the artist, not his *capacity*, gave the sterling value to his work" (213).

embodied by the likes of Frederick Fairlie, only became crystal clear as the century was drawing to an end. When the Esquire of Limmeridge House decided to intervene in the affairs of the Institution at Carlisle with his catalogue of sun-pictures, the distinction between what Maurice Beebe called commercial and pure art was not so clearly perceived as it was when Gleeson White found to his amazement reproductions of Botticelli's *Primavera* in the outermost neighbourhoods of London.²⁴⁰ By then, the "million's taste" noticed by Lord Salisbury had conquered *fin-de-siècle* suburbia. Fairlie's barbarians were no longer an anecdote. Actually, they were in command.

6.6 MODERN BARBARIANS

Mechanics Institutes as the one mentioned by Collins' Esquire were intended to ameliorate the skills of a badly trained workforce deemed a hindrance for the economy and, more importantly, for the cohesion of the social body of the country.²⁴¹ In Karl Marx's words, working men were "as much the invention of modern times, as machinery itself" (qtd. in Berman 20). And, like any new invention, still incomprehensible to many. Charles Kingsley wrote in 1848 about the great benefit conferred by institutions like the National Gallery upon the lower orders: "Picture-galleries should be the workman's paradise, and garden of pleasure, to which he goes to refresh his eyes and heart with beautiful shapes and sweet colouring, when they are wearied with dull bricks and mortar, and the ugly colourless things which fill the workshop and the factory" ("The National Gallery.—Nº I" 5). Kingsley's wish was all the more urgent in a decade full of tremendous political upheavals such as the Chartists petitions. Marx, it is worth bearing in mind, published *The Communist Manifesto* in collaboration with Engels the very same year of Kingsley's appraisal of art contemplation on workmen's minds. These were indeed "present times of political excitement" in the words of Robert Peel and, inevitably, the promise of an imaginary paradise acquired a new importance as a means to soothe a social

²⁴⁰ See Beebe 24.

²⁴¹ Later to be known as Birkbeck College, the London Mechanics' Institute, the first of its kind, opened its doors in December 1823. Quite interestingly, according to Terry Eagleton, "'English' as an academic subject was first institutionalised not in the Universities, but in the Mechanics' Institutes, working men's colleges and extension lecturing circuits" (*Literary Theory* 23).

body increasingly restive: “I say, pictures raise blessed thoughts in me—why not in you, my brothers?” asked Kingsley. “Your hearts are fresh, thoughtful, kindly: you only want to have these pictures *explained* to you, that you may know *why* and *how* they are beautiful, and what feelings they ought to stir in your minds” (“The National Gallery.—Nº I” 6). Kingsley’s wishful thinking brings to mind Mr Prattleton’s criticism of those who encouraged dustmen to give their eyes a rest over the free gifts of art. The former, it must be emphasised, did not encourage his fellow workmen to approach a work of art with an open mind as Collins suggested years later when criticising the purchasing policy of the National Gallery.²⁴² On the contrary, from Kingsley’s point of view, the uninstructed eye lacked proper training to appreciate the value of a painting. The workman needed guidance from those who already know *why* and *how* a picture deserved to be thought as beautiful at all. Therefore “critics, connoisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books” were more necessary than ever. The very same paternalistic guidance against which Collins rebelled in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) found in Kingsley a staunch supporter who, when qualifying his brothers’ hearts as “fresh, thoughtful, kindly”, quite perversely applied to his convenience Locke’s notion of *tabula rasa*. Workmen, as it turned out, had a natural predisposition towards beauty despite being ignorant of it; they only required a bit of direction from those blessed with aesthetic knowledge to recognise what the beautiful meant. In a way, this very same thought prompted Frederick Fairlie to compose his catalogue of sun-pictures for the benefit of the Institution at Carlisle—although no doubt the Esquire did so out of contempt for a working class he heartily despised. But to look down with patronising benevolence or distaste upon the populace was easier at the very beginning of the 1850s than when *The Woman in White* began serialisation in the pages of *All the Year Round* and the remembrance of the Art Treasures Exhibition still lingered on the air. Collins’ novel, faithful to its nature as commodity-text, although set in the most recent past, is thoroughly indebted to its time. As matters stood in 1859, the aesthetic education of a bunch of barbarians was no longer condescending matter: it had been taken seriously enough to organise a gigantic exhibition of art treasures for their better improve-

²⁴² Alongside the British Museum, Kingsley noted, the National Gallery was the only place where “the poor and the rich may meet together, and before these works of God’s spirit ... the Englishman may say—‘Whatever my coat or my purse, I am an Englishman, and therefore I have a right here. I can glory in these noble halls, as if they were my own house’” (“The British Museum” 183).

ment. Self-appointed arbiters of taste like Frederick Fairlie were losing their sway in aesthetic matters. The chain of events that eventually lead to the multiple reproductions of Botticelli's *Primavera* in the drawing rooms of suburbia was set in motion during the mid-century. Fairlie had certainly a tough task ahead when trying to indoctrinate the minds of the "Goths and Vandals to a man" with his art catalogue. Apparently, it never crossed the Esquire's mind, and neither that of Kingsley for that matter, that maybe workmen had no desire at all to be explained the meaning of pictures by one of those who looked down on them from the heights of his ivory tower. Barbarians did not mix well with appreciators of the beautiful no matter how salutary their intentions were.

Collins, I think, depicted in *The Woman in White* the split between two antagonistic conceptions of taste, a highbrow one embodied by the Esquire Fairlie and the more popular (and coarse) favoured by those at the bottom of the social ladder which, as Collins made clear in *Basil* (1852), was becoming a force to be reckoned with. As time went by, Mr Sherwin's cheap taste seemed more than capable of spreading out of suburbia like a modern influenza and eventually reaching the remote shores of Cumberland. That Fairlie, an inheritor of the eighteenth century tradition of connoisseurship, embarked in the seemingly impossible task of improving the taste of the barbarous people of his neighbourhood denouncing the Gothic tendencies of those attending the Institution at Carlisle is hardly surprising.²⁴³ The term, amongst highbrow quarters, conveyed a sense of barbarity that lingered until well entered the second half of the century: "Gothic", wrote F. W. Fairholt in his *A Dictionary of Terms in Art* (1871), "as a term in architecture, it is applied to the mediaeval works ... as a term in criticism, it is used to indicate anything in a barbarous taste" (217).²⁴⁴ Not by chance it was a meaning duly applied by conservative critics when assessing the value of Pre-Raphaelitism. John Everett Millais and his friends, it was suspected, were drawing inspiration from the kind of art that

²⁴³ Collins had already equated the term with barbarism in his first published novel, *Antonina; or the fall of Rome* (1850), set during the last years of the Roman Empire "from the period of the march of the Gothic invaders over the Alps, to the close of the first barbarian blockade [*sic*] of Rome" (iv). Collins' review of the 1851 Summer Exhibition followed suit when praising Mr Poole's "Goths in Italy" because of its "barbaric grandeur and simplicity" and "striking wildness and mystery" (Collins, "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 620-621).

²⁴⁴ The word Gothic, Frank Davis notes, kept an "uncomplimentary meaning" (*Victorian Patrons of the Arts* 24).

had flourished previous to Raphael, that is, a Gothic one. In this sense, Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850), judged from the standpoint of the guardians of art orthodoxy, evinced the malpractice of the brethren, a denial of the principles upon which the English School of painting had been painstakingly built throughout decades of hard labour. However, John Ruskin's letters to *The Times* and the publication of his book upon Pre-Raphaelitism greatly tempered the negative coverage received by the young artists. His was a support that went a step further with the publication of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). In the chapter entitled "The Nature of Gothic", Ruskin turned upside down all the negative connotations that the term had conveyed since the eighteenth century and posited the Gothic style of architecture as the best embodiment of mediaeval values so much needed in mid-nineteenth century England. Of course, the novelty of Ruskin's position was relative, inspired as he was by Augustus Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836) with his appeal for a renewal of Gothic architecture and praise for the social structure of the Middle Ages.²⁴⁵ But it is undeniable that Ruskin's volte-face was indeed quite a remarkable one: the archaism that had been charged against the Pre-Raphaelites—*grace à Dickens*—was now deemed worthy enough to be praised. In fact, paradoxically, Ruskin saw it as sign of the brotherhood's contemporaneity: "The particular tastes of the people", he wrote, "will be best met, and their particular ignorances best corrected, by painters labouring in the midst of them, more or less guided to the knowledge of what is wanted by the degree of sympathy with which their work is received" (*The Political Economy of Art* 132). Modern society, Ruskin argued, was rotten to the core and thoroughly disconnected from the spiritual needs of the nation. Therefore, there was a real need of going back to a time when men were fully able to develop their personalities unconstrained by the requirements of contemporary life.²⁴⁶ That such a time only existed in Ruskin's imagination never bothered him at all.

²⁴⁵ The full title of Pugin's book is clear in its scope and intention: *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day. Shewing the Present Decay of Taste. Accompanied by Appropriate Text.*

²⁴⁶ Doing so, Ruskin buried the approach made by the so-called early Gothic novelists of the Enlightenment: neither Anne Radcliffe nor Hugh Walpole sought personal fulfilment in the past as Ruskin (or Pugin for that matter) did. On the contrary, both Radcliffe and Walpole reasserted the values of the society of their time when setting their plots against the barbarism and depravity of the past.

Collins most probably knew of Ruskin's involvement in Pre-Raphaelite's affairs—hardly any intellectual of the mid-century remained ignorant of it. Back in the day, in the midst of the stir caused by the publication of *Modern Painters*, the former made a passing reference to the art critic in his correspondence with an American acquaintance: “Although I do not follow my father's profession (being a student of Lincoln's Inn; and only painting at leisure moments, in humble *amateur-fashion*, for my own amusement) I live very much in the society of artists and can therefore tell you something of the impression made by Ruskin's work”, Collins wrote. “The violent paradoxes, when cleverly argued, usually produce; they amused some, displeased others, and startled everybody. It was pretty generally admitted that the Author was a vigorous and dashing writer, who has studied Art with genuine enthusiasm, but with doubtful judgment” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 53). Ruskin's success with his readers was a matter of contention. Most of them, Collins argued, thought of him “as a man, who having determined to say something new on every subject that he touched, resolutely overlooked or dogmatically contradicted any received and tested principle of intellectual or critical truth that came in his way” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 54). His capabilities, as Collins put it, were “woefully misdirected”, and public opinion was quite ambivalent regarding the first volume of *Modern Painters*. Ruskin, it was widely accepted, in most cases misunderstood eccentricity for originality. Consequently, Collins argued, “his book had its small circle of resolute admirers—but it made a sensation, and only a sensation, among the larger class of readers—artists and amateurs” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 54). However, the second volume of *Modern Painters* met with moderate praise. Ruskin's “expression of regret for the arrogance of manner in his preceding publication ... raised him immensely in the estimation of cultivated and thinking readers” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 54). But Collins still remained ambivalent:

I have merely looked into myself, but I have heard it spoken of by artists who have read it carefully as a work of very unusual power, exhibiting a deep sympathy with the highest purpose of Art—poetical observation of Nature—and profound critical appreciation of many of the works of the ‘Old Masters’. Some paradoxical opinions it might contain, in common with the preceding volume; but they were urged in a different spirit, and were amply compensated by the general intention of the book, and the real good to be gained

from it—philosophically as well as pictorially—by attentive readers. Such is the general opinion of this second Volume, so far as it has reached me. (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 1: 54)

These artists, one guesses, were both Millais and Holman Hunt, about to show their first Pre-Raphaelite paintings at the Royal Academy by the time of Collins writing his letter in 1849. Bearing in mind Collins' heartfelt distrust of art criticism, it can be argued that he never cared much about Ruskin's opinions. As he confided, all that he knew about him was through hearsay. Maybe things changed as the brethren's fortunes became deeply entangled with Ruskin's outspoken criticism but, as far the remaining evidence shows, Collins remained quite aloof. The brethren, nonetheless, found the support of the foremost art critic of the time invaluable in the midst of the critical onslaught that followed the exhibition of Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850). Holman Hunt, when looking back to the early years of the brotherhood, recalled how this was a time when the "tendency towards imitation of classicism ... was fast waning" (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 91).²⁴⁷ But it did so not without trouble. Right at the beginning of the mid-century when the plot of *The Woman in White* starts, it was commonly thought that any approach to painting that did not follow the rules derived from the great masters of the Renaissance was "based upon ignorance and tainted with barbarism" (Davis, *Victorian Patrons of the Arts* 24). Therefore, Dickens had good reasons to be horrified by the glaring insolence of Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850), a tribute to "the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 265). Nothing sublime, nothing resembling the fallen likeness of the angels of God could be spotted on that canvas. Millais' painting, Dickens argued, was a catalogue of monstrosities. For Ruskin, nonetheless, it was a supreme work of art. Frederick Fairlie's aestheticism, I think, is the antithesis of the medievalism posited by Ruskin in "The Nature of Gothic" and

²⁴⁷ As for architecture, he was thoroughly right. The Gothic revivalism that ensued at the dawn of the Victorian era still reverberated in the mid-century, a movement so popular "that graduates of the Universities, whether clergy or squires, fostered it eagerly, demolishing old and putting up new churches in the 'correct style' with mechanically-reproduced stained-glass designs in startling colours caricaturing the harmonious splendours of Gothic traceries" (Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 92). That painting was never affected by this revisionism should be credited to the pervading influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds's teaching. Or so it was until the mid-century. Promoting a new aesthetic at odds with inherited practices, the Pre-Raphaelites naturally enraged the guardians of art orthodoxy who accused them of endorsing a mediaeval (that is, Gothic) style of painting—although, as far as I know, they failed to condemn the architectural style whose success rested on the very same premise.

enacted by the Pre-Raphaelites in their pictorial practice. If Millais' depiction of the Holy Family stood for the lowest depths of mankind, then the Madonna by Raphael presiding over Fairlie's cabinet of art treasures encapsulated the values that the young Pre-Raphaelite seemingly forgot to apply when painting *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Ruskin's appraisal of the brethren's pictorial practice ran contrary to the art orthodoxy embodied by the Esquire of Limmeridge House. Endorsing an eighteenth-century aesthetic credo heavily indebted to Sir Joshua Reynolds' take on the Renaissance, and thoroughly unaware of the Pre-Raphaelite threat growing in London, Frederick Fairlie was inevitably predisposed to equate Gothic with barbarous taste. No better qualification could be found for a populace devoid of the most elemental aesthetic discrimination than that of "Goths and Vandals to a man" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 346)—a remembrance of the hordes that had ravaged the Roman Empire. Fairlie, a living embodiment of a conception of beauty increasingly under threat by nineteenth century commodity culture, lived in a time when "intelligence, choiceness of feeling, concern for the forms of life and expression deteriorated" (Auerbach 501). Holman Hunt was right, classicism was on the wane. The project of aesthetic democracy was slowly encroaching upon forlorn appreciations of the beautiful.

Arguably, Collins was one amongst those who revolted against the kind of art orthodoxy embodied by the supercilious aesthete of Limmeridge House, quite explicitly compelling people to disregard established opinions in pictorial taste. Common sense, he argued, was good enough to approach a work of art. Intelligent people, after all, had a right "to express their opinions boldly, without the slightest reference to any precedents whatever" (Collins, "To Think, or Be Thought For?" 193). Collins, to his credit, was doing exactly that. No writer as far as I know challenged the art establishment in such a blunt way as he did—not certainly targeting one of the main cultural institutions of the country, the National Gallery, highly regarded by most of his peers. Collins' "To Think, or Be Thought For?" (1856) reads, I think, as a sort of Pre-Raphaelite manifesto in a time when the Brotherhood had already ceased to exist although its name still conveyed a sense of defiance. Siding with the middle classes against the supercilious bunch of art experts in charge of the cultural policy of the nation was a clever way for Collins of identifying himself with the readership of *Household Words*, the very same

readership that was sustaining his practice as a professional of the pen. His was a clear, and merciless, criticism of a pernicious system that favoured the rule of taste of a clique of painters, critics and connoisseurs against the aesthetic capabilities of the general public. As he argued, the purchasing policy of the National Gallery did not reflect at all the (allegedly) pluralistic character of the institution, only its tendentiousness. We the people, Collins argued, have our own interests left unattended for the greater benefit of a group of art *entendus* whose restricted conception of taste obeyed to their own fancy. Self-appointed teachers in matters of art were thoroughly useless. We, the intelligent people, Collins further elaborated, are perfectly capable of discriminating by ourselves. Therefore, that one of these supposed teachers could start an aesthetic crusade of sorts for the greater benefit of the public at large was simply preposterous. However, that was exactly the intention of Frederick Fairlie in *The Woman in White* with his catalogue of sun-pictures: to improve the taste of ignorant people in matters of art. For a man used to look at Raphael's Madonna with admiration the mere idea of a bunch of barbarians thinking of themselves as arbiters of taste was unthinkable, even derisory. But that was the reality beyond the walls of Limmeridge House, and certainly one that did not bode well for the likes of Fairlie. Those living in the comfy solitude of their art palaces were soon to be disturbed by conceited fake connoisseurs. Fairlie's catalogue of sun-pictures could well try to direct the tide of aesthetic democracy to his best convenience, but eventually it was doomed to failure. Because when venturing to improve the taste of the populace the Esquire had taken the Goths and Vandals from their barbarous condition to a new one still to be defined. As Lord Salisbury put it, photography, living by the patronage of the million, "will adapt itself to the million's taste" (qtd. in Steegman, *The Rule of Taste* 279). Once that his catalogue had been submitted to the Institution at Carlisle, then the crumbling of Fairlie's authority began. A multiplicity of eyes were to look at his art treasures, and a multiplicity of minds were to judge the value of the objects portrayed in sun-pictures. In his contempt towards the uninstructed populace, Collins' aesthete was advancing the cause of art for the masses. The improvement of the barbarians' taste will prove Fairlie's undoing.

6.7 MADONNA

George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), published the very same year of Collins' *The Woman in White*, includes a long reflection on the art of painting worth quoting: "So I am content to tell my simple story", the narrator writes, "without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread" (261). Truth, Eliot argued, should be the guiding principle of the real artist:

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise ... I turn, without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors to an old woman benign over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner ... 'Foh!' says my idealistic friend, 'what vulgar details! What good is there in taking in all these paints to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase of life!—clumsy, ugly people.' ... Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. (262-263)

Eliot's positioning meant a dramatisation of the ordinary against the orthodoxy of conventional art: "But, bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope? ... Yes! thank God; human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty—it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it" (263).²⁴⁸ Eliot's fondness for an art grounded on commonplace things echoed Millais' depiction of the Holy Family in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) *as they should have been in nature*. Painting the Virgin Mary in the exact likeness of a mature woman was a blunt attack on the idealisation of beauty proposed by Sir Joshua Reynolds long ago, the very same idealisation that prompted Adam Bede's "idealistic friend" to lambast the depiction of "clumsy, ugly people" as a vulgar effort. Ralph Wornum, writing in *The Art Journal* apropos *Christ in the House of His Parents*,

²⁴⁸ F. G. Stephens uses a similar metaphor: "Let us have the mind's workings, not the remains of earnest thought which has been frittered away by a long dreary course of preparatory study, by which all life has been evaporated. Never forget that there is in the wide river of nature something which everybody who has a rod and line may catch, precious things which every one may dive for" (qtd. in Hosmon 60).

addressed this major objection to the Pre-Raphaelite painting: “The physical ideal alone can harmonise with the spiritual ideal: in *Art*, whatever it may be in Nature in its present condition, *the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body*; lofty sentiment and physical baseness are essentially antagonistic; even in the lowest sinks of poverty in the world, the purest mind will shine transcendent” (qtd. in Andres 8). Pre-Raphaelitism, as rendered by Millais’ canvas, was a thorough rejection of this elemental truth stretching back to the Renaissance’s appraisal of Neoplatonic thought and the belief of a man’s soul being mirrored in his body—or that of an artist in his work. Marsilio Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica* (1482) best elaborated this argument when writing how either in paintings or buildings “the wisdom and skill of the artists shines forth” to the point that “we can see in them the attitude and the image, as it were, of his mind; for in these works the mind expresses and reflects itself not otherwise than a mirror reflects the face of a man who looks into it” (qtd. in Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* 93-94). A deranged mind, the argument followed, could not produce a great work of art. The success of such thought—indeed a *topos* in art theory—reached the eighteenth century and can be found in Jonathan Richardson’s *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715) with his claim of being the painter’s morality key for his success as an artist: “The way to be an Excellent Painter, is to be an Excellent Man. A Painter’s Own Mind should have Grace, and Greatness; That should be Beautifully and Nobly form’d. A Painter ought to have a Sweet, and Happy Turn of Mind, that Great, and Lovely Ideas may have a Reception there” (qtd. in Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* 94). For the likes of Wornum, inheritors of Ficino’s thought, the faithful depiction of commonplace things deserved no praise whatsoever. In fact, it was a blatant vulgarity from which they recoiled in earnest. To the most beautiful soul corresponded a most beautiful body, Millais’ painting being merely a reflection of the artist’s sheer conceit. Little Wornum knew how *Christ in the House of His Parents* heralded the fading away of an aesthetic for long thought unquestionable.

By the time of publication of Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), one could well think as Ruskin did that art orthodoxy had finally embraced the aesthetic proposed by the Pre-Raphaelites. Nature, he thought, had triumphed upon Idealised Beauty. For Eliot, however, the fight was not over yet:

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children—in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy ... paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done their clusters of onions. (264)

Obliterating common, coarse people from the realm of Art, Eliot argued, necessarily implied their exclusion from other realms as religion or philosophy: “Therefore let Art always remind of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the losing pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them” (264). Eliot wished an Art grounded on empathy towards the great multitude, not recoiling from it. Indeed, a shadow of class consciousness permeates her denunciation of aesthetic rules imposed from above, presumably by those devoted to “the divine beauty of form” and anxious to debar the depiction of coarse faces from the realm of painting. Eliot firmly believed that the worship of idealised beauty failed to reach the hearts of ordinary people—its focus on proportion, not human sympathy, could only imply falsehood. Her understanding of art, I think, powerfully echoes that of F. G. Stephens, one of the original founders of Pre-Raphaelitism, as elaborated in his 1850 essay on early Italian art for the short-lived journal *The Germ*. The modern artist, Stephens argued, should exhibit “a firm attachment to truth in every point of representation,

which is the just method” (qtd. in Hosmon 59).²⁴⁹ Eliot probably remained ignorant of the Pre-Raphaelite journal, an enterprise of very limited reach that did not last long. However, in my view there is no doubt that the thoughts expressed in *The Germ*, intended as a sort of Pre-Raphaelite manifesto, eventually reverberated in *Adam Bede*.²⁵⁰ Attachment to truth meant, for both Stephens and Eliot, the careful rendition of Nature on a canvas—and by extension on printed matter. Theirs was a shared conviction of men and women not living in isolation, ignorant of each other, but as part of a wider whole. This social duty of art crucially shaped Eliot’s aesthetic positioning: “It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers” (265). The divine beauty of form, understood as the only rule for pictorial representation, had no moral purpose behind it. In fact, it was mere distortion. As Stephens wrote, “[t]he Arts have always been most important moral guides” (qtd. in Hosmon 62). It is precisely this inherent morality that Eliot embraced so heartily. Only aesthetic rules that fostered empathy with our fellow citizens, she argued, were worthy of consideration. Art should favour “weather-beaten faces” instead of enraptured Madonnas, its true *raison d’être* being the cohesion of a fragmented social body still reeling from the abrupt changes brought by capitalist development.²⁵¹ Pre-

²⁴⁹ In fact, truth should be the only guide for any artist serious enough about his task: “For how can good be sought by evil means, or by slight in any degree? By a determination to represent the thing and the whole of the thing, by training himself to the deepest observation of its fact and detail, enabling himself to reproduce, as far as is possible, nature herself, the painter will best evince his share of faith” (qtd. in Hosmon 59). But such purpose, as Stephens saw it, was tainted by a system where “every school, and indeed every individual, that has ... departed from the true spirit in which all study should be conducted, sought to degrade and sensualise, instead of chasten and render pure, the humanity it was instructed to elevate” (qtd. in Hosmon 63). Stephens had indeed harsh words for those involved: “[s]o has that school, and so have those individuals, lost their own power and descended from their high seat, fallen from the priest to the mere parasite, from the law-giver to the mere courtier” (qtd. in Hosmon 63).

²⁵⁰ Eliot, in her essay “The Natural History of Modern Life” (1856) for the *Westminster Review*, had already challenged the realism of Holman Hunt: “Even one of the greatest painters of the pre-eminently realistic school, while, in his picture of ‘The Hireling Shepherd’, he gave us a landscape of marvellous truthfulness, placed a pair of peasants in the foreground who were not much real than the idyllic swains and damsels of our chimney ornaments” (qtd. in Murdoch 318). Clearly she was acquainted with Pre-Raphaelitism well before the publication of *Adam Bede*. There is a chance of Holman Hunt being aware of Eliot’s criticism having claimed later on that “[m]y first object as an artist was to paint, not Dresden china *bergers*, but a real shepherd, and a real shepherdess” (qtd. in Murdoch 318).

²⁵¹ Striving to reach a social harmony only meant to happen in an utopian future, Eliot’s approach reads as a further elaboration of the thesis expounded by Stephens who thought of the flourishing of the Arts as “always coincident with the most wholesome period of a nation’s: never with the full and gaudy bloom which but hides corruption, but the severe health of its most active and vigorous life” (qtd. in Hosmon 63).

Raphaelitism, however, fell short of Eliot's political manoeuvre. The brethren might well have approached the Arts as having an inherent morality to them but they failed to fully develop a political philosophy in the way Eliot did—or at least attempted to do.²⁵² Stephen's theories had a tinge of wishful thinking tainting them.

As society was evolving, so art should do. The faithful study of nature provided a solid ground upon which to build an aesthetic suitable to the times. To paint the life of the people, Eliot thought, and not to depict beautiful forms for the sake of supercilious art critics, was the true purpose of Art. Collins, acting under that very same conviction, had addressed the plot of his story of modern life “towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it” (*Basil* 3). The faithful representation of commonplace things in literature that Eliot thought as the true purpose of Art had an earlier champion in Collins. He, as Eliot, understood that idealised beauty could not appeal to a society increasingly diverse and far from uniform. A new language was needed, one not of exclusion but grounded on truth as it was in Nature. Eventually, the reality so stubbornly embraced by Collins in a time when Pre-Raphaelitism faced the harshest criticism was slowly gaining ground. But turning to commonplace things and elevate them to a new form of art was not a small feat neither in 1852 nor in 1859. Were not for the many challenges still laying ahead Eliot would not have written such elaborate disquisition: “It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise” (262). Indeed, lofty-minded people were not particularly predisposed towards an aesthetic that deviated so radically from their cherished idealisation of beauty. Ruskin could well praise the definite triumph of Pre-Raphaelite ideals, but Eliot knew how firm was the grasp still exerted by those admirers of the divine beauty of form. Her narrator in

²⁵² In “The Natural History of Modern Life” (1856), Eliot touched on issues still to be fully developed years later in *Adam Bede*. Reviewing Wilhem Heinrich von Riehl's work on social history, Eliot lavished praise on him for his approach to common people. Any artist, she argued, should be guided by a truthful representation of reality: “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions—about the manners and conversations of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavy-laden men should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead to the true one” (qtd. in Andres 12). Eliot, thinking of any idealisation of reality as shameless falsification, naturally praised Ruskin's *Modern Painters* since, as she argued, “[t]he truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality” (qtd. in Andres 13). Arguably, *Adam Bede* was written with that doctrine in mind.

Adam Bede did indeed turn “without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors to an old woman benign over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner” (262). Still quite a few would not do so. Art, many thought, should have better things to do than depict the exact likeness of haggard old women. Looking at a painting should be a quasi-mystical experience, a chance of getting a glimpse of a better reality clouded from our eyes. Cherubs were more enthralling to look at than clowns. For the likes of Frederick Fairlie, there was no compromise possible.

6.7.1 A DELIGHTFUL CONCEPTION

“Shall I confess it, Mr Hartright?—I sadly want a reform in the construction of children”, boldly asserts Fairlie during his interview with the drawing master. “Nature’s only idea seems to be to make them machines for the production of incessant noise. Surely our delightful Raffaello’s conception is infinitely preferable?” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 43). It is a delightfulness not perceived by Hartright who, when looking at the painting hanging on the wall, merely notices a Madonna surrounded by cherubs resting on buff-coloured clouds: “The Virgin and Child, protected by glass, and bearing Raphael’s name on the gilt tablet at the bottom of the frame” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38-39). The scanty information provided makes impossible to ascertain what kind of Madonna owns Fairlie. The only remarkable detail that could help to identify the canvas, the attendance of the Virgin by flying angels mentioned by the Esquire, applies to most of Florentine Madonnas.²⁵³ However, notwithstanding this lack of definition, Anne Brownell Jameson’s *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts* suggests the kind of picture that Collins had in mind. Jameson’s book, a success by the time of its publication in 1852, dealt with the iconography of the subject throughout the history of Western art. And it was a long history indeed. During the Council of Ephesus in the fifth century it was agreed—certainly not by everyone—that Mary was mother both of Jesus the man and Jesus the God.²⁵⁴ The decision, crucial as it was, did not have an immediate ef-

²⁵³ See Jameson xlvii.

²⁵⁴ Such was the claim of the Nestorians, those who followed the patriarch of Constantinople against the Monophysites and their belief in the double nature of Christ. Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex* (1976) remains a valuable introduction to this fascinating subject.

fect until the seventh century when the cult of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, really set off in the West reaching the Renaissance. Alone amongst all women, Mary gave birth to the Saviour being spared of Original Sin. She did not suffer the pain of childbirth as any other daughter of Eve had done before and after: in fact, the integrity of her body was never broken since her hymen remained intact.²⁵⁵ Christianity equated woman with womb and womb with evil: to perform the sexual act with passion—a passion made available through a weakening of the will called *epithymia* (concupiscence)—meant to repeat Adam’s sin.²⁵⁶ We are all sinners, came to say the Church, because of the pleasure enjoyed by our forefathers in the act of sexual procreation. The *summa voluptas*, the temporal erasure of personality so much feared by Saint Agustine, obliterated the pain suffered by Christ in this Valley of Tears. Therefore, little option had early Christian theologians but to press on Mary’s virginity. Christ the Saviour could only be born from a Virgin untainted by any trace of sexual desire. Because if not, how could he be different from any of us? But if the virginity of Mary was taken for granted, what about her parents? Did not the original sin apply to her? The answer was straightforward: Mary was miraculously born from Anne, blessed by the Lord with a child in her old age when she was unable to conceive. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Saint Anne, the Virgin, the child and Saint John* (1498) best summarised this theological scaffolding where women were able to give birth by themselves in a sort of miraculous parthenogenesis. As the myth developed, Mary’s virginity (*virgo intacta post partum*) became a staple of the Christian faith, her body transformed into a fortress against the temptations of the flesh: “I am a wall, and my breasts are as a strong tower” (qtd. in Brown 383). Both Mary’s virginity and his acceptance into Heaven after death encapsulated two key aspects of the Church’s doctrine: the fear of contamination by an alien influence and the rejection of mutability. The *Madre di Dio*, as the Madonna is also referred in Italy, meant a return to the antique conception of the Redeemer

²⁵⁵ In 390 the Pope Siricius, not without controversy, proclaimed Mary a virgin *during* the pregnancy *and* the birth of Christ. Later, on 451, at the council of Chalcedon, the Virgin was named *Aieparthenos* (ever-virgin) because of her virginity *post partum*.

²⁵⁶ According to Saint Agustine, the *concupiscentia carnis* is “[a]n urge which burns quite indiscriminately for objects allowed and disallowed; and which is bridled by the urge for marriage, that must depend upon it, but that restrains it from what is not allowed ... Against this drive, which is in tension with the law of the mind, all chastity must fight: that of the married couple, so that the urge of the flesh may be rightly used, and that of continent men and virgins, so that, even better and with a struggle of greater glory, it should not be used at all” (qtd. in Brown 424).

resting on a rainbow and surrounded by cherubs “so divinely ethereal that they seem uplifted by their own spirituality: not even the air-borne clouds are needed to sustain them” (Jameson 82). Indeed, the Italian masters did achieve an extraordinary degree of refinement in their depictions of the Mother of God. For Jameson, the Italian Madonnas “have no touch of earth or earth’s material beyond the human form; they proper place is the seventh heaven; and there they repose, a presence and power—a personification of infinite mercy sublimated by innocence and purity; and thence they look down on their worshippers and attendants” (82). The accompanying drawing of the Virgin in Jameson’s book shows the veracity of her words: Mary is depicted resting with the infant Christ standing by her side whilst three cherubs occupy the bottom of the composition. She is the embodiment of infinite mercy sublimated by innocence and purity, a staunch contrast to the dirty little legs and noisy little lungs to be seen (and heard) in daily life. As Jameson rightly pointed out, nothing earthly has spoiled the beauty of the Italian Madonnas.²⁵⁷ They stand aloof from this valley of tears inhabiting a realm of their own.

Towards the end of Collins’ *The Woman in White*, Hartright, coming back from Ireland after sketching “for certain forthcoming illustrations in the newspaper to which I was attached” (641), is summoned to Limmeridge House where his now wife Laura (née Fairlie) and Marian Halcombe await him: “They had established themselves ... in the little room which had been once assigned to me for a studio, when I was employed on Mr Fairlie’s drawings. On the very chair which I used to occupy when I was at work, Marian was sitting now, with the child industriously sucking his coral upon her lap” (642). The recent death of Frederick Fairlie has prompted a small revolution in Limmeridge House that Halcombe is quick to notice: “She rose; and held up the child, kicking and crowing in her arms. Do you know who this is, Walter? She asked, with bright tears of happiness gathering in her eyes” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 643). The child, as Hartright harshly remarks, is his son, although not from

²⁵⁷ Louisa Twinning’s *Synbols and Emblems of Early Christian Art* (1852) is a lavishly illustrated compendium of the different motives used during the early centuries of the new religion that I had the chance to consult at the British Library. Even when Twinning’s book does not mention the Madonna—it was a late development adopted from the Greek church—it shows the interest aroused in the mid-nineteenth century towards Christian imagery, to my mind an unintended outcome of the Oxford Movement.

Marian's point of view: "Do you talk in that familiar manner of one of the landed gentry of England?" replies Halcombe. "Are you aware, when I present this illustrious baby to you notice, in whose presence you stand? Evidently not! Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr Walter Hartright—the *Heir of Limmeridge*" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 643). For those in the know, the hint to Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) was clear. A tremendous success at the time, Yonge's book was reviewed by Collins for *Household Words* in the year immediately preceding the serialisation of *The Woman in White*—and not precisely in a sympathetic way. Collins heartily despised the coarse sentimentality and poor craftsmanship of the book. He was shocked by the prattle of the hero who "struck speechless with reverence when a rhapsodical description of one of Raphael's Madonnas is read to him" (Collins, "Doctor Dulcamara, M. P." 51). And a good rhapsody indeed it is: "Dwell on the form of the Child", Yonge writes, "more than human in grandeur, seated on the arms of the Blessed Virgin as on an august throne". Following Yonge, such a sight was quite a remarkable one:

Note the token of divine grace, His ardent eyes, what a spirit, what a countenance is his; yet His very resemblance to His mother denotes sufficiently that He is of us and takes care for us. Beneath are two figures adoring, each in their own manner. On one side is a pontiff, on the other a virgin, each a most sweet and solemn example, the one of aged, the other of maidenly piety and reverence. Between, are two winged boys, evidently presenting a wonderful pattern of childlike piety. Their eyes, indeed, are not turned towards the Virgin, but, both in face and gesture, they show how careless of themselves they are in the presence of God. (*The Heir of Redclyffe* 50)

The divine grace of the composition belongs to the *Madonna di San Sisto* or *Sistine Madonna* (1513-14), arguably one of Raphael's masterworks depicting the Mother and Child surrounded by multiple cherubs half discernible amongst clouds with Saint Sixtus and Santa Barbara paying homage. Collins, I suspect, decided to end *The Woman in White* with a parody of sorts of Yonge's book. Marian Halcombe sitting with Hartright's child is hardly a random occurrence when bearing in mind her physical peculiarities: "The instant my eyes rested on her", Hartright recollects, "I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace

of her attitude ... The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 31). However, to Hartright’s surprise, Marian’s facial features are remarkable in a disconcerting way:

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 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. (Collins, *The Woman in White* 32)

Halcombe’s peculiar physique marks a stark contrast with that of her half-sister Laura Fairlie—as Hartright puts it, “[a] fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress, trifling with the leaves of a sketch-book, while she looks up from it with truthful, innocent blue eyes” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 50).²⁵⁸ Halcombe, to her credit, is perfectly aware of the differences between them:

My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie’s father was a rich man. I have got nothing and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am—— Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself. (Collins, *The Woman in White* 34)

²⁵⁸ As she is portrayed in *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie thoroughly fulfils the ideal of womanhood rendered by Basil when writing about “some woman, fresh, innocent, gentle, sincere; some woman whose emotions are still warm and impressible, whose affections and sympathies can still appear in her actions, and give the colour to her thoughts; some woman in whom we could put as perfect faith and trust, as if we were children; whom we despair of finding near the hardening influences of the world; whom we could scarcely venture to look for, except in solitary places far away in the country; in little rural shrines, shut up from society, among woods and fields, and lonesome boundary hills” (Collins, *Basil* 22).

Physical features are correlated with psychology in Collins' novel. The softness and purity embodied by Laura—indeed the personification of Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House—are inextricably linked with her usefulness as a woman: sweet-tempered and charming by nature, she lacks Halcombe's masculine drive and resolution.²⁵⁹ As she bluntly tells Hartright, Halcombe is too odd to fit into gender prejudices. Hartright's uneasiness when seeing her face—"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" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 32)—plainly justifies Halcombe's spinsterhood. Crucially, Hartright will feel that strange sensation again when meeting his patron for the very first time. Frederick Fairlie, whose physical peculiarities are not lost to the middle class drawing master—"[h]is feet were effeminately small, and were clad in buff-coloured silk stockings, and little womanish bronze-leather slippers. Two rings adorned his white delicate hands, the value of which even my inexperienced observation detected to be all but priceless" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 39)—fails to impress the young draughtsman who cannot avoid feeling a strange repulsion towards the dubious gender of his new patron.²⁶⁰ At Limmeridge House, as Hartright soon realises, one meets in the flesh the contradictions expected from dreams. To both Halcombe and Fairlie can be applied the notion of liminal bodies standing in the threshold "between the two terms of an opposition, like human/beast, male/female, or civilised/primitive, by which cultures are meaningfully to organise experience" (Hurley 190).²⁶¹ The Esquire's attachment to his collection of art treasures, his total surrender to the delights afforded by the contemplation of beautiful things, are all the more reprehensible when seen through the eyes of a humble teacher of drawing forced to sell his craft in order to make a living. No doubt many readers of *All the*

²⁵⁹ The inspiration behind the character of Marian Halcombe is difficult to ascertain: "A character in fiction", Collins wrote, "can only be made true to the general experience of human nature, by a principle of selection which is broad enough to embrace many individuals who represent, more or less remarkably, one type. There are many 'Marian Halcombes' among us—and *my* Marian is one of the number" (qtd. in Peters 217). However, George Eliot, in friendly terms with Collins towards 1858, might well be the main inspiration behind the character: "Now in this vast ugliness", wrote Henry James, "resides a most powerful beauty, which ... steals forth and charms the mind" (qtd. in Peters 217). Eliot's curious mingling of physical ugliness and charming personality matched the character of Halcombe.

²⁶⁰ As the solicitor Vicent Gilmore states, "Mr Frederick Fairlie's marrying and leaving and heir" are "the two very last things in the world that he was likely to do" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 149-150).

²⁶¹ Nelly Hurley employs the notion of liminal body referring to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British Gothic literature. Although I think to call "Gothic" the fiction of the *fin-de-siècle* is misleading, nevertheless Hurley strikes a point when using the concept of liminal entities for several novels of the period.

Year Round would have agreed with Hartright when recoiling in earnest from his patron: “My sympathies shut themselves up resolutely at the first sight of Mr Fairlie” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Devotees of the beautiful, and of dubious sexuality, had no place whatsoever in the sympathies of mid-century professional men. I thoroughly disagree with Ellen Moers when she writes how “the blurring of the sexes had long been the preoccupation of the decadent movement in France” (309) before being appropriated by the English *fin-de-siècle*. Actually, that “blurring of the sexes” was clear to any Victorian spectator attending the freak shows of mid-century London—shows that, to my mind, were well known to such a *flaneur* as Collins was.²⁶² Androgyny, the mingling of female and masculine traces in one body, was far from a novelty to the readers of *All the Year Round* when *The Woman in White* started serialisation. That, and a not so much researched French influence upon Collins’ fiction, might well explain the physical peculiarities of both Halcombe and Fairlie.

Collins, a thorough Francophile, was an avid reader of Casanova, Balzac, Victor Hugo and Théophile Gautier. Hartright’s “helpless discomfort” when meeting Marian might well be inspired by Casanova’s *Memoirs* (1826-38) or even Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1834), works where the main characters feel a strong attraction towards effete men disguised as women. According to Mario Praz, Maupin made of androgyny a sort of fashion “which assumed alarming proportions only in the second half of the century” (175).²⁶³ In Gautier’s world, androgynous characters embody aesthetic qualities unknown to masculine ones. Halcombe, as Fairlie, can be approached as an androgyne or *tertium quid*, a liminal subject who does not belong to any of the two established gender categories. The Virgin, it is important to

²⁶² Madame Clofullia, the Bearded Lady of Geneva, and Julia Pastrana, exhibited as “The Ugliest Woman in the World” in Regent Street in 1857, were perhaps the two most famous examples of freaks in mid-century England. Both Clofullia and Pastrana were introduced as scientific discoveries, sensational human beings *hors de la norme*. Following Richard Collins, “exhibitions of racial and intersex human specimens reached the height of their notoriety in London and Germany during the 1850s” (162). They were referred as “anomalies” or “curiosities”. The death and later embalment of Julia Pastrana popularised the term “nondescript”, understood as “a person or thing that is not easily described, or is of no particular class or kind” (qtd. in R. Collins 162). Pastrana was to be known as “The Embalmed Female Nondescript” and it might well have played a part in Marian Halcombe’s characterisation.

²⁶³ Introduced in France by Benjamin Constant and Victor Cousin, Friedrich Schiller’s belief in the social regenerative powers of aesthetic education had been reworked by the Saint-Simonians “into the crudest sort of moralistic instrumentality” (Dowling 43). *Mademoiselle de Maupin*’s harsh preface by Gautier, an extreme reaction against the bureaucrats of the July revolution of 1830, was meant against them: “En vérité”, Maupin asserts, “ni l’un ni l’autre de ces deux sexes n’est le mien ... je suis d’un troisième sexe à part qui n’a pas encore de nom ... j’ai le corps et l’âme d’une femme, l’esprit et la force d’un homme, et j’ai trop ou pas assez de l’un et de l’autre pour me pouvoir accoupler avec l’un d’eux” (qtd. in Busst 41).

bear in mind, through her continence “appeared supremely asexual and consequently supremely androgynous” (Busst 48) inhabiting a realm not of this world. Ambrose, one of the fathers of the Church in the West, had asserted that the virgin state could only be fully reached through *integritas*, that is, the special condition of keeping one’s own body unpolluted from alien forces.²⁶⁴ Ambrose’s interpretation of the Virgin Mary as *aula pudoris*, a royal hall of undamaged chastity, proved momentous in the construction of the myth of the Madonna.²⁶⁵ Mary did not suffer the pain of childbirth as any other daughter of Eve had done before and after: the integrity of her body remained intact during the whole process. Arguably, such integrity also applies to Marian Halcombe, a proud spinster who happily embraces her unmarried life: “My heart and my happiness, Walter, are with Laura and you. Wait a little till there are children’s voices at your fireside. I will teach them to speak for me, in *their* language; and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be—We can’t spare our aunt!” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 637). Collins ended *The Woman in White* with a negative image of the Madonna: the virgin Halcombe holding in her lap the future Esquire of the Limmeridge state. As the Child was seated on the arms of the Blessed Virgin in Charlotte Yonge’s book, so it does little Hartright in the closing scene of *The Woman in White*. Uncompromising fidelity to Nature guided Collins in his very particular rendition of the Madonna, with the crabbed and odd Halcombe fulfilling the duties of the Mother of God. Untouched by man, Marian remains, like Mademoiselle de Maupin, “vierge,—vierge comme la neige de l’Himalaya” (qtd. in Busst 43)—a sort of negative portrait of Mary. Daguerreotype truthfulness has taken over divine grace in Collins’ novel with an error of Nature acting as the holiest of women in Christian thought—a thorough subversion of the “delightful Raffaello’s conception” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 43) praised by the likes of Frederick Fairlie. *The Woman in White* answered, certainly in a contorted way, Eliot’s call in *Adam Bede* (1859) for an aesthetic that did not vanish from the realm of art a beauty more concerned with human sympathy than with proportion. Men like Fairlie could well be “struck speechless with reverence” (Collins, “Doctor Dulcamara, M. P.” 51) when confronting a portrait by Raphael.

²⁶⁴ In Ambrose’s own words, “[f]or in what does the chastity of a virgin consist, but in an integrity unexposed to taint from the outside? And, indeed, when a girl is deflowered by the customary process of marriage, she loses what is her own, when something else comes to mix with her” (qtd. in Brown 354).

²⁶⁵ See Warner 50-67 for a further discussion of Christian thought about woman and sex.

Collins was far from impressed. Actually, he never stopped feeling uncomfortable with the imposition of aesthetic rules that favoured honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form.

6.7.2 RAPHAEL'S POETRY

In his series “The Pictures-Galleries of England” (1851) for *Bentley's Miscellany*, Collins' French dilettante Mr Scumble stumbles upon a Madonna by Raphael when strolling around the picture galleries of the capital. The chance encounter proved momentous: Raphael's composition “still exerts its charm over us, still seems lovely as ever, even from the distance at which we now stand”, Mr Scumble recollects. “What poetry ...!—that highest, noblest Art-Poetry which is always studied from Truth, but which never degenerates into mere imitation—which is pure and elevated, yet never artificial, never unnatural” (Collins, “The Pictures-Galleries of England” 81). Collins' dilettante is genuinely enraptured by the painting: “Look at that Madonna and Infant. You and I have often seen a mother and child unconsciously assume that very position”, continues Mr Scumble. “And yet Raffaele has produced something more here than a fine picture of a mother and child: *that* mother is holy among mothers; *that* child is divine among children; the purity of *that* beauty is clothed in an earthly form, but is imbued with a heavenly perfection, it breathes a heavenly spirit” (Collins, “The Pictures-Galleries of England” 81). Mr Scumble's appraisal might read like the unbounded joy of an art aficionado before a great work of art. However, bearing in mind the date of publication of the article, the rapturous appreciation showed by the French dilettante must be approached as a distorted echo of Dickens' merciless take on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.²⁶⁶ Mr Scumble's emphasis upon the Truth embedded in Raphael's Madonna was meant as a rebuttal to one of the commonest complaints labelled against Pre-Raphaelitism, that is, its intolerable artificiality. Collins, perfectly aware of the path he was treading upon, put in the mouth of his French dilettante the kind of criticism vociferously embraced by Dickens when attacking the Brotherhood, that is, a criticism that endorsed the aesthetic pro-

²⁶⁶ The French nationality of Mr Scumble is far from coincidental bearing in mind the date of publication of “The Pictures-Galleries of England” (1851). Events in France seemed to be spiralling out of control after the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon and there was widespread fear of the French being ready to invade England. No doubt Mr Scumble's refined sensibilities of foreign extraction did not escape the attention of the readers of *Bentley's Miscellany*.

moted by the Royal Academy and whose origins went back to the staunchest supporter of the Raphaellesque school of painting, Sir Joshua Reynolds: “The purity of *that* beauty is clothed in an earthly form”, Mr Scumble notes of the *Madonna*, “but is imbued with a heavenly perfection, it breathes a heavenly spirit” (“The Pictures-Galleries of England” 81). As an appraisal, it brings to mind Dickens’ “Old Lamps for New Ones” (1850) with his comment of having Raphael a “ridiculous power of etherealising, and exalting to the very Heaven of Heavens, what was most sublime and lovely in the expression of the human face divine on Earth” (265). At least on a canvas, the argument followed, humanity could attain the divine beauty of ethereal beings, the spiritual condition lost since the Fall. Raphael deserved special praise for giving us “all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts ... all tender, awful, sorrowful, ennobling, sacred, graceful, or beautiful associations” (Dickens, “Old Lamps for Old Ones” 265). However, Millais, with his depiction of the Holy Family, instead of rising to the divine quite gladly remained well grounded on earth. His depiction of the child Jesus was, according to Dickens, a paean to “the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting”, obliterating “all Post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts” (“Old Lamps for New Ones” 265). Millais forgot that the blemishes of Nature were impossible to reconcile with the high aims of Art. As Ralph Wornum put it, “*the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body*” (qtd. in Andres 8). And it was precisely in this subtle balance between divine and earthly beauty where the real value of the Madonna laid. What Mr Scumble, and Dickens for that matter, found admirable in Raphael’s work—that rendering upon a canvas of a realm only to be seen in the afterlife—was thoroughly absent in Millais’ painting. And it was done on purpose. As F. G. Stephens wrote in the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*, “the introduction of false and meretricious ornament led the Arts from the simple chastity of nature, which it is as useless to attempt to elevate as to endeavour to match the works of God by those of man” (qtd. in Hosmon 62). That false ornament, a mere distraction from the true purposes of art inherited from Raphael and his school, should be dismissed by the true artist. Only following nature could truth be conveyed upon a canvas: “Let the artist be content to study nature alone”, wrote Stephens, “and not dream of elevating any of her works, which are alone worthy of representation” (qtd. in Hosmon 62). Which is exactly what Raphael did with his Madonna presiding over Fairlie’s cabinet of art treasures. The mas-

ter of Urbino embodied a conception of painting detested by the Pre-Raphaelites because of its artificiality and conceit. In this sense, a long paragraph from F. G. Stephens is worth quoting:

There is a magnificent Niello work by an unknown Florentine artist, on which is a group of the Saviour in the lap of the Virgin. She is old (a most touching point); letting aloud, clutches passionately the heavy-weighted body on her knee; her mouth is open. Altogether is one of the most powerful appeals possible to be conceived; for there are few but will consider this identification with humanity to be of more effect than any refined or emasculate treatment of the same subject by the later artists, in which we have the fact forgotten for the sake of the type of religion, which the Virgin was always taken to represent, whence she is shown as still young; as if, nature being taken typically, it were not better to adhere to the emblem throughout, confident by this means to maintain its appropriateness, and, therefore, its value and force. (qtd. in Hosmon 60)

It was precisely the lack of any refinement, that is, of any idealised beauty, which made Niello's work so compelling from a Pre-Raphaelite point of view. There is nothing in that picture of the "heavenly perfection" that enraptures Mr Scumble when looking at the Madonna by Raphael and which is arguably the very same frisson felt by Fairlie towards the model family that presides over his room. Niello's depiction of the Virgin's humanity posited an aesthetic at odds with the taste of "the lofty minded people" referred by Eliot and embodied in *The Woman in White* by the supercilious Esquire of Limmeridge House. Indeed, in 1849 when Stephen wrote "The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art", there were few who were keen to turn to admiration towards Niello's depiction of the Virgin and Child. Raphael's approach still commanded the uppermost authority: "There was no question that the perfect mother, whether sacred or secular, would look like a Raphael Madonna" (Malcolm Warner 6).²⁶⁷ Collins, setting the plot of *The Woman in White* around that time, placed Fairlie alongside a still powerful minority attached to a conception of beauty that favoured idealised art as

²⁶⁷ Interestingly, the very particular religious environment of Protestant England may be a reason for the success of the Madonna: "Madonnas and Holy Families were favourite types of sacred subject", Malcolm Warner writes, "perhaps representing the most acceptable face of Roman Catholic art in Protestant Britain, and there were a larger number of them in the National Gallery—proportionally more than say, the number of crucifixion scenes" (6). Although there were no Madonnas by Raphael on exhibition at Trafalgar Square, his influence was heavily felt through the Royal Academy.

the only one worthy of contemplation. Honour and reverence were indeed due to the divine beauty of form at Limmeridge House, as it was in Yonge's book. In this sense, Frederick Fairlie was an adamant supporter of an aesthetic rule that quite explicitly excluded from the realm of Art "old women scraping carrots" (Eliot 264). Looking at Raphael's Madonna, as the Esquire makes clear, there was no notice whatsoever of the commonest of human traces: "No dirty little legs to run about on, and no noisy little lungs to scream with" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). Raphael's painting was indeed the depiction of an idealised family, one where beautiful bodies reflected the beauty of their souls. Anne Jameson was thoroughly right, the Italian Madonnas were devoid of any earthly touch being "a personification of infinite mercy sublimated by innocence and purity" (82). Reason enough for the extreme, even fanatical, reverence expressed by the aesthete of Limmeridge House.

In Collins' *Hide and Seek* (1854), Mary, the lead female character, is nicknamed Madonna because of her very particular physical features such as "incomparable blue eyes, which would have driven the young men of my time mad" and beautiful hair of "light brown colour" (34-35). Mary's resemblance with the Mother of God does not go unnoticed: "The general effect of these features, the shape of her head and face, and especially her habitual expression, reminded all beholders at once, and irresistibly, of that image of softness, purity, and feminine gentleness, which has been engraved [sic] on all civilised memories by the 'Madonnas' of Raphael" (Collins, *Hide and Seek* 35). Collins never for a moment mentioned Sir Joshua Reynolds when depicting this very particular embodiment of the Madonna, but the teachings of the first president of the Royal Academy remained in the background. It was the purpose of Classical Art, as Collins quite explicitly pointed out, to remind "nobody of anything simple, familiar, or pleasing to them in nature" (*Hide and Seek* 132). And so it had remained for decades until Collins' Pre-Raphaelite friends refused to conform prompting Dickens' attack on Millais for his depiction of a Madonna who "would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England" ("Old Lamps for New Ones" 265). The "softness, purity, and feminine gentleness" that characterises the Madonna of *Hide and Seek* was missing from *Christ in the House of his Parents*, Collins' Mary echoing the idea of beauty as depicted by the master of Urbino—"the

nearest living approach ... to that immortal ‘Madonna’ face” (*Hide and Seek* 35).²⁶⁸ And there is a chronological reason for that. The rejection of artistic dogma carried out by the brethren was unheard of when Mr Blyth, Madonna’s adoptive father and painter by profession, opened the doors of his studio to the new aristocracy of money alongside that of art and race. Setting the plot of his novel in the earliest decades of the century, well before the apparition of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Collins naturally depicted a world when any questioning of art orthodoxy was hardly tolerated. But things were to change soon. The critical onslaught suffered by Millais when hanging his very particular vision of the Holy Family in the walls of the Royal Academy was coetaneous to the plot the *The Woman in White*. As the American critic Charles Norton put it after visiting the Art Treasures Exhibition, “English collectors have long had a passion for Raphael, and England is almost as rich in his works in oils as Italy herself” (qtd. in Pergam 154).²⁶⁹ Indeed, Collins’ supercilious aesthete belonged to this breed of devotees of the Italian master, adherents to an aesthetic creed under pressure as the decade went by. Were not for the pecuniary efforts of the new aristocrats of money welcomed to Mr Blyth’s studio, most probably Classical Art would have remained unquestioned for decades to come. But questioned it came. And the high praise bestowed upon paintings like Raphael’s *Transfiguration* suffered in accordance.

It was utter nonsense, Collins argued in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), to value a painting depending upon the idealisation made of its subject. A work of art that bore so little relation with day-to-day reality as the *Transfiguration* did could only be taken seriously because of the weight of tradition imposed upon it. And, again, there was a man to blame for that: “Sir Joshua Reynolds interposes critically, and tells us the figures on the wall and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are sublime, because they do not remind us of our own species”, Collins complained. “Why should they not remind us of our own species? Does not Sacred History inform me that the prophet was a Man, and does not Profane History describe the sibyl as an Old Woman? Is old age never venerable and striking in real life?” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 195). Of course, old age was venerable and striking in real life, Collins

²⁶⁸ Despite some minor faults—too large eyes, a small mouth and a nose “not Grecian enough for some people’s tastes” (*Hide and Seek* 35)—Mary’s beauty is widely lauded because of her extraordinary resemblance with the ideal of beauty depicted by the Italian master.

²⁶⁹ Two Madonnas by Raphael were lent by Earl Cowper for the Manchester event. See Pergam 155.

had no doubt about that, but not to Reynolds and his coterie of followers, a bunch of supercilious arbiters of taste who valued a painting in accordance to its lack of adherence to Nature. Theirs was an aesthetic stand best exemplified by Charles Kingsley in *Alton Locke* (1850) when praising the glories of the master of Urbino: “Glorious Raffaele!”, Kingsley wrote, “Shakespeare of the south! Mighty preacher, to whose blessed institution it was given to know all human hearts, to embody in form and colour all spiritual truths, common alike to Protestant and Papist, to workman and to sage” (*Alton Locke* 355). Renaissance artists like Raphael or Michael Angelo, Collins complained, were deemed worthy of the highest praise for their commitment to a depiction of beauty thoroughly fake. And it was against such practice, still prevalent in the mid-century, that a bunch of young artists were revolting when the plot of *The Woman in White* starts. The Esquire of Limmeridge House, the proud owner of a Madonna by Raphael, therefore emerges as a staunch defender of art orthodoxy in a time when new wealthy patrons—Ruskin’s “solid weight of gold” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 23)—were in search for a pictorial language that could make their own. As it followed, the aesthetic proposed by the Pre-Raphaelites perfectly suited their requirements, no matter the chagrin caused amongst the guardians of art orthodoxy, long established arbiters of taste who benefited from the apathy of a society whose lack of confidence on its own capabilities for discernment was proverbial. Kingsley’s rant merely reflected the thoughts of these self-appointed masters in the knowledge of Classical Art. And Collins’ supercilious, effete and egotistical aesthete in *The Woman in White*, being one amongst them, was an embodiment of everything wrong with that people. However, theirs was an authority that would not last long. Steadily, the social changes prompted by capitalist development were turning upside-down the social body of the country. As the mid-century advanced, “the vast numbers of newly literate working-class audiences [were] prepared to invoke the English right of judging for themselves” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 89). Collins, who quite gladly wrote of his misfortune of differing from the connoisseurs, was merely waiting for these new audiences to be confident enough to assert their right.²⁷⁰ And, once they did so, gone were Sir Joshua Reynolds’ critical interpositions. Barbarians ignorant of the most elemental aesthetic knowledge were approaching Limmeridge House with a very particular understanding of what

²⁷⁰ See “To Thought, or Be Thought For” 196.

beauty was meant to be. And it did not necessarily entail a blind admiration of the glories of Raphael. The days of Frederick Fairlie as an arbiter of taste were numbered.

6.7.3 OF MEN AND BEAUTY

From an aesthetic standpoint, the work of art affords the closest experience possible to the formal, immutable perfection that the Christian creed promises in the afterlife. Frederick Fairlie, looking enraptured at Raphael's Madonna, knows that the Renaissance painting stands aloof from death and change, a depiction of a realm never to be attained on this earth: "'Quite a model family', said Fairlie leering at the cherubs. 'Such nice round faces, and such nice soft wings, and—nothing else. No dirty little legs to run about on, and no noisy little lungs to scream with'" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). Raphael's cherubs have no resemblance whatsoever with the children of the village that once in a while intrude into the grounds of Limmeridge House to the Esquire's chagrin: "Such brats—oh, dear me, such brats!" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 40). Fairlie longs for a quietness like that of heaven without dirty little legs and noisy little lungs to disturb his tranquility. Or perspiration like that of Lady Glyde's maid:

Let me do the girl justice. Her shoes do *not* creak. But why do Young Persons in service all perspire at the hands? Why have they all got fat noses, and hard cheeks? And why are their faces so sadly unfinished, especially about the corners of the eyelids? I am not strong enough to think deeply myself, on any subject; but I appeal to professional men who are. Why have we no variety in our breed of Young Persons?²⁷¹
(Collins, *The Woman in White* 347)

There is neither sweat nor unfinished faces to affect Fairlie's wretched nerves on Raphael's canvas, only the idealised beauty of Madonna and Child that has forsaken human nature. The Esquire, when looking at his Renaissance painting, gets a glimpse of a world without men-

²⁷¹ To the Evangelicals, worried about the impact of literature on innocent minds, "[t]he pale cheek of the archetypal 'Young Person', Georgiana Podsnap, whose parents were obsessively concerned lest any remotely disturbing suggestion or indelicate word imperil her innocence, served as a moral litmus paper, a norm to whose supposed sensibilities and publishers ceaselessly deferred" (Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* 193).

acing disturbances: “How immeasurably superior to the existing construction! I will close my eyes again, if you will allow me. And you really can manage the drawings? So glad. Is there anything else to settle? If there is, I think I have forgotten it” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44). Human faces are certainly unfinished when compared with those of the delightful conception as envisioned by Raphael, truly a depiction of an otherworldly realm. Admiring a model of family completely removed from the common herd of humanity as he does explains a good deal about the solipsistic nature of Fairlie. In fact, in his long contribution to the plot of *The Woman in White* he explicitly charges against “the odious selfishness of mankind” as it is shown by the treatment “in all classes of society, which the Single people receive at the hands of the Married people” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 352). From Fairlie’s very particular point of view, society despises those magnanimous enough to sacrifice themselves for the greater benefit of mankind: “When you have once shown yourself too considerate and self-denying to add a family of your own to an already overcrowded population, you are vindictively marked out by you married friends, who have no similar consideration and no similar self-denial, as the recipient of half their conjugal troubles, and the born friend of all their children” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 352).²⁷² If the Madonna and Child are perfect at all it is because of their thorough removal from the daily concerns of this world. The Esquire of Limmeridge House, as devotee of the beautiful, lives a contemplative life removed from the world of human affairs where fat noses and hard cheeks are a constant reminder of our imperfect human nature and inevitable fate. With good reason Anne Jameson thought of the Italian Madonnas as thoroughly antithetical to human concerns since “[they] have no touch of earth or earth’s material beyond the human form; their proper place is the seventh heaven” (82). Indeed, they were superior to the existing construction as Fairlie cleverly hinted when looking at Raphael’s canvas. Following Hannah Arendt, “[a]s early as Aristotle, the distinction between quiet and unquiet, between an almost breathless abstention from external physical

²⁷² Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) established the diminution of resources available as direct consequence of the growing population, greatly influencing Darwin’s theories of evolutionary change as the result of the fierce competition between the weakest and the strongest individuals. Darwin’s struggle for existence is clearly indebted to Malthus: “As more individuals are produced than can possibly survive”, the former wrote, “there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life” (qtd. in Ceraldi 186). Interestingly, the publication of *The Origin of the Species* was coetaneous to the serialisation of *The Woman in White*.

movement and activity of every kind, is more decisive than the distinction between the political and the theoretical way of life” (115). *Initium ut esser homo creatus est*, said Saint Agustin—“That a beginning be made man was created”. New beginnings springing from human action lack the permanence and stability of otherworldly figures as rendered by the skilful hand of the artist. Limmeridge House is to be ruled by the child of a middle-class drawing master who makes a living selling his craft to a mass media. Eventually, the dirty legs and noisy lungs so much feared by the Esquire will intrude into the quietness of what were once his private domains with the birth of Hartright’s son, a necessary upheaval of the tainted Fairlie’s bloodline. Truly, capitalist development has arrived to the remote shores of Cumberland by the end of *The Woman in White*. The qualities for which Hartright is heartily commended by Marian Halcombe—“the self-control, the delicacy, and the compassion of a man who was naturally a gentleman” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 69-70)—will eventually triumph upon Fairlie’s effeteness whose pathological aversion to action thrives in the peculiar atmosphere of Limmeridge House, alien to the bustle of booming cities like London from where Hartright comes. Halcombe has indeed reasons enough to be puzzled by the Esquire’s attitude: “I don’t know what is the matter with him, and the doctors don’t know what is the matter with him, and he doesn’t know himself what is the matter with him”, she complains. “We all say it’s on the nerves, and we none of us know what we mean when we say it” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 34). Had Halcombe thought of the Esquire as an aesthete devoted to the contemplation of beautiful things, then the riddle that is Fairlie would have been solved. He belonged to a very small group of rare men of leisure who devoted their lives to cultivate a “highly-appreciative feeling towards Art and its professors” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 110). And such appreciation, which necessarily entailed a very particular mindset, was not exempt from risks.

The third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797) rendered sensibility as “a nice and delicate perception of pleasure or pain, beauty or deformity [which] seems to depend upon the organisation of the nervous system” (qtd. in Todd 7).²⁷³ Fairlie’s wretched state of

²⁷³ Already in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1776) we are informed that “[p]hysicians tell us of a disorder in which the whole body is so exquisitely sensible, that the slightest touch gives pain: what some have thus suffered in their persons, this gentleman felt in his mind. The slightest distress ... touched him to the quick, and his soul laboured under a sickly sensibility of the miseries of other” (qtd. in Todd 98).

nerves confirms the accuracy of the definition. Being an aesthete, the Esquire of Limmeridge House exhibits an acute sensibility towards the beauty of artifice that clouds his judgment to the point of preventing any kind of normal intercourse with other human beings. As Collins wrote in *Armada* (1864-1866), “[w]e live in an age when nervous derangement (parent of insanity) is steadily on the increase” (713). Fairlie’s neurasthenia can be approached as one of the several diseases—melancholia and spleen amongst others—deemed as “peculiarly English diseases of affluence, the symptoms of the over-indulgence, idleness, and excess of the civilised refinement of the upper class of both sexes” (Taylor 33) that exerted a peculiar fascination in Collins since the beginning of his long professional career: “My nerves, my nerves! What a heart of stone he must have to presume on my poor nerves!” (*A Rogue’s Life* 159). Indeed, Collins’ use of the motive was a recurrent one, with Ozias Midwinter’s eyes in *Armada* (1864-1866) described as “affected in some degree by a nervous restlessness in his organisation, which appeared to pervade every fibre in his lean, lithe body” (73)—even Ovid Vere, the hero of *Heart and Science* (1883), cannot escape from this ubiquitous malaise: “But his shattered nerves unmanned him, at the moment of all others when it was his interest to be bold” (108).²⁷⁴ The Esquire’s acute predisposition as an aesthete towards the contemplation of beautiful things lies behind his fondness for Raphael’s conception. When looking at the Madonna, Fairlie obtains a glimpse of Shaftesbury’s *to kalon*, that mingling of beauty, truth and cosmic order which epitomises the greatest realities of things and where, according to the Earl’s aesthetic philosophy, “humankind had once found the area of its fullest becoming” (Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 96). Fairlie knows that, resting his eyes on Raphael’s portrait, he contemplates a promised perfection never to be attained in this valley of tears. The cherubs’ round faces and “nice soft wings” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 44) set them apart from the heinous children who once in a while threaten the Esquire’s blessed tranquility. As the realm of Art is devoid of them, so are Fairlie’s private chambers where the light “deliciously soft, mysterious, and subdued ... helped to intensify the deep silence, and the air of profound seclusion that possessed the place” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 38). The aesthete inhabits a thoroughly different kind of realm with rules of its own, and all the more spe-

²⁷⁴ Later in *Heart and Science* Vere is again shattered by his nerves: “Alone on the landing, he dashed the tears away from his eyes, suffering and sorrow tried hard to get the better of his manhood: they had shaken, but had not conquered him” (138).

cial for being of his own creation. Fairlie's praise of the Mother and Child for their insurmountable superiority to the existing construction evinces a thorough understanding of the aesthetic experience utterly unknown to the sad Goths in Art encroaching upon Limmeridge House. Secluded in his chamber of art treasures, and trying to replicate a stillness only attainable in the imaginary realm of art, the Esquire Fairlie is a complete and absolute monster of aestheticism.

Inevitably, the presence of a Madonna by Raphael amongst Fairlie's collection of art treasures brings to mind Sir Joshua Reynolds' approach towards the Renaissance and his endorsement of idealised beauty which echoes, I think, one of the main tenets of the Christian creed, the longing for "the formal ... immutable perfection of each resurrected individual" (Warner 102) exceptionally granted to Mary because of her status as mother of Christ. Raphael, with his depiction of the Mother and Child attained the impossible: to provide an accurate rendition upon a canvas of a state of being only to be enjoyed after the Second Coming. This extraordinary quality of the work of art, its immutability standing firmly against the ravages of time, was cleverly spotted by Henry James in *The Tragic Muse* (1890): "Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away, but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries had only sweetened their freshness" (581). On the contrary, they showed an impressive resilience: "The same faces, the same figures looked out at different worlds, knowing so many secrets the particular world didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung" (581).²⁷⁵ The aesthete, as someone who *sees*, has realised the immortality of the work of art against the backdrop of his very own mortality.²⁷⁶ The deeper layers of reality are laid bare to those endowed with the aesthetic vis-

²⁷⁵ James' words bear an eerily resemblance with those written down by Sir Joshua Reynolds a century before. The artist, the latter wrote, has to look "only on those general habits which are everywhere and always the same; he addresses his works to the people of every country and every age, he calls upon posterity to be his spectators" (*The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds* 45). Accordingly, the quality of taste emerges as "regulated and formed by the presiding feelings of mankind,—by those works which have approved themselves to all times and all persons" (Reynolds, *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds* 134).

²⁷⁶ Walter Hamilton, in his *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), referred to the *aesthete* as one of those "who pride themselves upon having found out what is the really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities" (vii).

ion. However, James' very particular approach to artistic creation—"the most inspiring [thing], in the sense that while generations, while works had come and gone, they seemed far most to prevail and survive and testify to the capacity of the great work of art" (581)—did not come out of the blue. In fact, it drew heavily on Walter Pater's essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873): "It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions", wrote Pater upon La Gioconda. "All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the nomadism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits" (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 70).²⁷⁷ Pater's take on the immortality of the work of art echoed in the imperishable beauty of great pictures noticed by James. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was published, it is worth bearing in mind, only a few years after the Second Reform Act of 1867 which extended the franchise to the working class. The project of aesthetic democracy was enough consolidated in the 1860s for men like Pater or Matthew Arnold to question the role of art in a society that verged dangerously towards political equality. Both Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) endorsed a conception of art appreciation more suitable to connoisseurs than to those rapidly rising in the social ladder. The extreme detachment from Nature already pointed out by Collins as a prominent feature of Classical Art was given a new lease of life in the 1870s.²⁷⁸ To approach a painting in the way Pater did, noticing secrets of which the particular world was thoroughly ignorant, required a set of skills that only a very limited number of persons possessed. Frederick Fairlie belonged to those selected few who, when looking at a great picture, immediately realised the otherworldly quality of it. Collins' aesthete, as a matter of fact, approached art in the same way that William Blake did, as "a representation of what Eternally Exits, Really and Unchangeably" (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 55). Exactly what the Christian creed in the afterlife promised, and exactly what Raphael conveyed

²⁷⁷ Pater's essay was first published in 1869 in the *Fortnightly Review*.

²⁷⁸ See Collins, *Hide and Seek* 132.

through his portrait of the Madonna and Child. That eternal quality of the work of art, that immutable reality as interpreted by the artist, pervaded nineteenth century aesthetic thought: “A thing in Nature becomes much lovelier if it reminds us of a thing in Art, but a thing in Art gains no real beauty by reminding us of a thing in Nature”, wrote Oscar Wilde. “The primary aesthetic impression of a work of art borrows nothing from recognition or resemblance” (qtd. in Pierrot 21).²⁷⁹ Wilde’s witticism, a sort of summary of his aesthetic credo thoroughly indebted to Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, could well have been pronounced by Frederick Fairlie who recoiled in earnest from any pretence of Nature in works of Art when looking enraptured at Raphael’s Madonna. Others did the same. In Collins’ *The Law and the Lady* (1875), when his heroine Valeria Brinton takes a closer look at Misserrimus Dexter’s bizarre pictures, she does so not without risks: “Chance spectators like myself were gravely warned, by means of the inscription, to view the pictures as efforts of pure imagination. ‘Persons who look for mere Nature in works of Art’ (the inscription announces) ‘are persons to whom Mr Dexter does not address himself with the brush. He relies entirely on his imagination. Nature puts him out’” (*The Law and the Lady* 237). Arguably, so much was Fairlie put out by Nature that he did not hesitate in claiming for a reform in the constitution of children, mere machines of incessant noise. For the likes of Collins’ aesthete, a thing in Art gained no real beauty by reminding us of a thing in Nature—and vice versa. With good reason Fairlie found appalling Lady Glyde’s maid lack of composure when he asked her about his niece: “I received no answer. The Young Person’s face became more unfinished than ever; and, I think she began to cry. I certainly saw something moist about her eyes. Tears or perspiration? Louis (whom I have just consulted) is inclined to think, tears. He is in her class of life; and he ought to know best. Let us say, tears” (Collins, *The Woman in White* 347). Fairlie, belonging to a completely different class of life, has a very clear opinion about the utility of tears:

²⁷⁹ See Pierrot 166 for more information. Wilde’s remark drew on Pater’s assertion of the beauty of art demanding “a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature, because the beauty of art, like tears shed at play, gives no pain, is without life, and must be awakened and repaired by culture” (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 94).

Except when the refining process of Art judiciously removes from them all resemblance to Nature, I distinctly object to tears. Tears are scientifically described as a Secretion. I can understand that a secretion may be healthy or unhealthy, but I cannot see the interest of a secretion from a sentimental point of view. Perhaps my own secretions being all wrong together, I am a little prejudiced on the subject. (Collins, *The Woman in White* 347-348)

Tears, for Collins' aesthete, only made sense at all when seen through the artist's imagination. Fairlie's appeal to the "refining process of Art" predates Wilde's understanding of the aesthetic impression by almost half a century. As a thoroughbred aesthete, the Esquire of Limeridge House finds far more enticing the reality of the work of art than mere Nature. Indeed, Fairlie is quite prejudiced on the subject—despite, in his own words, behaving "on this occasion, with all possible propriety and feeling" (Collins, *The Woman in White* 348). He has good reasons to be so, enraptured as he is by the delightful conception depicted by Raphael where neither dirty legs nor little lungs are to bother one's blessed tranquility. When painting the Madonna, Raphael lifted the veil under which true reality remained hidden, depicting an ideal of human perfection never to be attained in a world populated by mischievous little brats. For a true appreciator of the beautiful as Fairlie is, Nature and Art were antithetical terms of impossible reconciliation with the aesthetic experience afforded by the work of art always remaining utterly alien to the existing construction, that is, humanity at large. Writing several years after the publication of *The Woman in White* and before Henry James' *The Tragic Muse*, Pater thought as the paramount mission of poets like Wordsworth "no to teach lessons, or enforce rules, or even to stimulate us to noble ends ... but to withdraw the thoughts for a little while from the mere machinery of life, to fix them, with appropriate emotions, on the spectacle of those great facts in man's existence which no machinery affects" (*Appreciations* 62). Such could be said was the effect of Raphael's Madonna on the Esquire Fairlie. Pater's understanding of the aesthetic experience as a means to stop the flux of time echoed the solipsistic state hinted by Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782): "The more a contemplator has a sensitive soul, the more he yields himself to ecstasies which excite in him this harmony", Rousseau wrote when addressing the dangers inherent to aesthetic contemplation. "A profound and pleasing reverie then fills his senses, and he loses himself with a

delicious intoxication in the immensity of the beautiful system with which he feels himself identified. Then all particular objects escape; he does not see and does not feel anything but everything” (qtd. in Beebe 46).²⁸⁰ Inevitably, then, to surrender to such a pleasant reverie entailed the withdrawal from Pater’s “mere machinery of life” into a realm of one’s own creation: “Calm and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplated life, and no arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the joints of his harness”, Wilde asserted. “He at least is safe. He has discovered how to live” (qtd. in Moers 302). But a great price has been paid for that safety. When replacing life by art, and then making of art a sacred ritual, the sensitive soul risked to be entrapped by imagination’s powerful grasp.²⁸¹ Chances were of getting intoxicated by ecstasies never tried before. The aesthetic critic eventually traded his humanity for the enjoyment of withdrawing into an otherworldly realm where beauty reigned supreme. Frederick Fairlie, a devotee of the beautiful lost in the contemplation of Raphael’s Virgin and Child, might have discovered how to live, but he did so to a terrible personal cost. *The Woman in White* ends with a dismissal of the forlorn idealisation of beauty embodied by the Esquire of Limmeridge House and the triumph, reflected on that real-life Madonna of sorts, Marian Halcombe, of an aesthetic based on truthfulness and fidelity to nature that necessarily implied dirty little legs and noisy lungs strolling around the ancient abode of the Fairlie family. Crucially, this was an aesthetic far more enticing to the reading public of *All the Year Around* than the stultifying reverence bestowed on the likes of Raphael by a class of English connoisseurs whose authority in matters of taste faded away as time went by. In Collins’ first long serialised novel, capitalist development asserts itself through the success of a professional man, Walter Hartright, whose resilience and determination marked a stark contrast with the idle aestheticism of his former patron. Devotees of the beautiful like Frederick Fairlie had no place left in the commercial, industrious 1850s. The realm of Nature, and not that of Art, was where the mid-Victorians chose to live.

²⁸⁰ Linda Dowling places Walter Pater’s work as the last stage of the long tradition of Whig aesthetics coming from Shaftesbury. See Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art* 3.

²⁸¹ “Life is replaced by art, and art becomes a sacred ritual” (Beebe 114).

CONCLUSION

Confidence in the amelioration of the ethical standard of the people due to an improvement of their aesthetic knowledge pervaded the development of English liberalism throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The Select Committee, appointed in 1816 to discuss the purchase of Lord Elgin's Greek marbles strongly favoured their acquisition on aesthetic grounds. Because the marbles afforded a unique opportunity to build a "school for study, to improve our national taste for the Fine Arts, and to diffuse a more perfect knowledge of them throughout this Kingdom", it was thought convenient their exhibition in a public gallery rather than a private one where they could "inform the public mind in what is dignified in art" (qtd. in Brewer 285). Therefore the purchase of the Elgin's marbles had been done not only to please the man of taste but also "for the use of the people, for the encouragement of arts, the increase of manufacturers, the prosperity of trades, and the encouragement of industry ... to create, to stimulate, to guide the exertions of the artist, the mechanic, and even the labourer" (qtd. in Minihan 18). Aesthetic education, it was firmly believed, could leave a positive imprint on people's minds—a salutary effect much needed as the mid-century approached. The short-lived *Politics for the People* (1848) best captured the sense of instability that pervaded the 1850s when enumerating a few of the most pressing problems of the day: "the Extension of the Suffrage; the relation of the Capitalist to the Labourer; what a Government can or cannot do, to find work or pay for the Poor" ("Prospectus" 1). The whole of Europe had just been shaken to the core by a wave of revolutions and, at least for a while, there was a real chance of the British constitution being reduced to ashes. Using the arts to draw closer an unstable social body seemed a clever policy to follow. In them, following the Earl of Shaftesbury, were to be found "that reigning liberty and high spirit of a people, which from the habit of judging in the highest matters for themselves, makes them freely judge of other subjects" (*Second Characters* 22-23). The most violent predispositions could be tamed by art appreciation, Shaftesbury suggested. And it was a belief that reached well into the nineteenth century, with Robert Peel trusting a softening of "angry and unsocial feelings ... by the effects which the fine arts had ever produced upon the minds of men" (qtd. in Minihan 56). Peel's "present times of political excitement" well justified such blind confidence. The chance of a social upheaval conditioned the political life of the country for a long time and gave an unexpected va-

lidity to Shaftesbury's thoughts on the benefits of art knowledge. However, the fact that only in 1876 the British Museum granted general public admission, the very same year when the national system of education was fully implemented in England, bears testimony to the many hardships faced by the nineteenth century project of aesthetic democracy. And when that happened, when education was made available on a national scale, then Robert Owen's "legislative measures" eventually came to full effect.²⁸² But in the meantime, right at the beginning of the mid-century when the plot of Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) starts, institutions like the Mechanics Institutes provided an educational shelter for those adults labouring under the roofs of the factories that had become a feature of the English landscape. The "Goths and Vandals to a man" referred by Frederick Fairlie were the unintended outcome of a new mode of production that was revolutionising the social structure of the country: "There died lately a cotton manufacturer, known as a patriarch among those of his calling, whose first spinning was by hand", can be read in a 1857 article for *Household Words*, "who then used a machine, worked in the beginning by a donkey,—in the end by a horse;—who then used, like his neighbours, a Newcomen's engine; and, at last, a Watt of five hundred horse-power" (Morley, "Men Made by Machinery" 99).²⁸³ Mid-century England was a very different society from that of previous decades, one where craftsmanship gave way to gigantic factories for the mass production of industrial commodities. The outcome of such portentous change for the social body of the country was hard to ignore: "We are already subdivided", Collins wrote, "by our

²⁸² "The employer regards the employed as mere instruments of gain", wrote Owen, "while these acquire a gross ferocity of character, which, if legislative measures shall not be judiciously devised to prevent its increase, and ameliorate the condition of this class, will sooner or later plunge the country into a formidable and perhaps inextricable state of danger" (11). By "legislative measures" Owen understood the creation of a national system of education that should act as a buffer against any kind of social unrest. He did not hesitate in calling upon the British Government "and the British Nation to unite their efforts, to arraign a system to train and instruct those, who for any good or useful purpose, are now untrained and uninstructed; and to arrest by a clear, easy, and practical system of prevention, the ignorance and consequent poverty vice and misery which are rapidly increasing throughout the empire" (Owen 20). However, no matter the boldness of Owen's ideas, they were conditioned by the lack of proper administrative resources during the first decades of the century—limited the state as it was to the Treasury, the courts and the military.

²⁸³ The article, a fascinating reflection upon the global economy of the mid-century, praised the benefits of industrialism: "The labour which is alone superseded by machinery, is that which is worst paid, and ... the steam-engine does not crush down a bad market without building up a better for the labourer" (Morley, "Men Made by Machinery" 99). Not surprisingly, the article accuses the Luddites of a complete misunderstanding of this new economy. With machinery, argued the anonymous author, comes a demand for better labour and therefore better payment.

professions, into distinct classes” (“Strike!” 170). They certainly were. Carlyle’s Age of Machinery had arrived. And the Victorians were still trying to figure out how to deal with it.

In a letter to William Holman Hunt dated 1886, Collins wrote of his impressions upon a recent painting exhibition of the former. Theirs was a friendship that remained unshakeable since the 1840s when Collins’ brother, Charles, met Holman Hunt at the Royal Academy of Arts. In the letter, written a few years before Collins’ death, he praised Holman Hunt’s ability to improve the aesthetic education of the public through his paintings: “With obstacles and discouragements which I lament”, Collins wrote, “you are nevertheless steadily doing good in teaching the people to see for themselves the difference between true art and false. Such a reform as this in the popular Taste works, as we both know, insensibly on the popular mind, and clears its way slowly through the thousand modern obstructions of conventionality and claptrap” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 522). Collins knew enough of reforms on popular taste by this time. Two of his best articles, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) and “The Unknown Public” (1858), had been the result of his interest in teaching people how to see—and judge—for themselves. The grip of a supercilious elite of self-appointed arbiters of taste was a heavy one when Collins began his literary career in the field of letters. And theirs was an authority that lasted long: “I saw some people silently wondering before the picture of the Christian priest, saved from the Druids”, Collins wrote to Holman Hunt. “They consulted in whispers, and went on to the next picture. But the Priest had got them. They came back—and had another look—and consulted again. Slowly and surely that fine work was pleading the good cause with people ignorant of the subtle beauty of it; but insensibly discovering its appeal to their sense of nature and truth” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 522). Any reform in popular taste, as Collins knew, took time. Paying attention to a literary genre, that of the penny journal, dismissed by highbrow criticism, he had realised long ago the opportunities afforded by a commodity-text whose success was built on the exploitation of issues deemed inappropriate enough for respectable audiences. The very same year of the publication of Collins’ *Man and Wife* (1870) saw the passing of the Education Act, also called the Forster’s Act, intended for the schooling of all children between the ages of five and twelve in England

and Wales.²⁸⁴ By then, as the now forgotten literary critic Arthur Compton-Rickett remarked, “the change in the audience, from a more leisured and better cultured one, to one that is more strenuous in its activities and has comparatively less culture and less money, has had its effect upon our poets, novelists and essayists” (406). That lesser audience had been already noticed by Collins more than a decade before in “The Unknown Public” (1858). As matters stood in the mid-century, not much could be expected from a readership who astonished Collins by its sheer ignorance. But things could well change in the future: “My own impression”, Collins wrote to the publisher George Smith in 1871, “is that a very few years more will see a revolution in the publishing trade for which most of the publishers are unprepared” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 349). That mid-Victorian blind confidence in the effects of progress was to act a miracle of sorts upon the unknown public, providing the market of books with a new gigantic readership. Collins’ ill-conceived attempt to publish a penny illustrated edition of *The Woman in White* obeyed to this belief: “I don’t believe in the gigantic monopolies, which cripple free trade, lasting much longer”, he asserted. “The Mudie monopoly and the W. H. Smith monopoly are anomalies in a commercial country” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 349).²⁸⁵ Of course, these were anomalies tolerated and supported, he forgot to say, by the very same readership that purchased his writing. Actually, Collins was living through a revolution in the making, the creation of a mass literary market that eventually came to fruition in the last decade of the century when the one-volume novel took on the three-decker as the new standard book format: “Your views on the question of publication have been my views for years past”, he replied to one correspondent in 1883. “I have tried thus far in vain to induce publishers to see the advantages (to themselves as well as to literature) of effecting a reform

²⁸⁴ There had been precedents, though. For instance, the Sunday Schools originated in the last decades of the eighteenth century were teaching by the mid-eighteenth-thirties between 800,000 and 1,000,000 pupils (L. James 3). Nonetheless the low quality of the education provided for, they set a precedent for future governmental action. For a discussion of the role of lower-class libraries and coffee-houses in the spread of literacy see L. James 5-7.

²⁸⁵ Collins’ idea to turn to the penny edition owed a great deal to the mismanagement that followed the glossy yellowback edition of *The Woman in White*: “This was aimed principally at the railway market and sold typically at two shillings, not a small sum, but the cheapest format in which reprint fiction was issued until the gaudy six-penny paperback appeared shortly before his death. Collins believed that Sampson Low had damaged his long-term interests by flooding the market with yellowback copies of *The Woman in White* in 1865, and thereafter insisted on a clause in his publishing agreements significantly delaying issues in railway format” (Law, “The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace” 102). Crucially, these yellowback cheap editions were sold in railway stalls owned by W. H. Smith.

already established in all other civilised countries. The vicious circulating library system is unquestionably beginning to fail, and the recent issue of sixpenny magazines shows an advance in the right direction” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 3: 452-453). And that was the direction of the unknown public. Collins had been right in predicting the disappearance of the monopolies crippling the commerce of books. However, as far I know, he never thought of the consequences to follow. Victorian essayists, Virginia Woolf argued when trying to understand the decay of essay writing, wrote predominantly for a very particular kind of public, one who, having time enough to sit down and read a magazine, had “a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it” (*Selected Essays* 10). As long as that standard was in place, the Victorian essay writer knew how to measure success. But such situation did not last long: “A change came from a small audience of cultivated people to a larger audience of people who were not quite so cultivated” (Woolf, *Selected Essays* 11). And when that happened, when the audience “more strenuous in its activities” in Compton-Rickett’s words became the dominant one, then the authority of the cultivated people suffered a serious blow. The lowering of literary standards that ensued provided Woolf with munition enough for one of her finest essays.²⁸⁶ However, writing in the 1920s, she seemed surprisingly ignorant of the constraints imposed by a publishing system that had ceased to exist long ago. For Woolf, the three-decker format of books was a mere recollection of her childhood. But for Collins it was an excruciating reality: “I will make a new start, with a new public!” (*The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 282), he boldly wrote about a possible penny edition of *The Woman in White*. The new start never happened, but that new public—properly speaking, hardly new since it had always been there as Collin perfectly knew—was already affecting the way the English market of books operated. It was only a matter of time for the project of aesthetic democracy not only to end Mudie’s monopoly, but also to challenge the authority of the leisured and cultured audience still setting a standard of what good literature, and good painting, should be.

As the 1850s progressed, and the pace of capitalist development quickened, the authority of self-appointed arbiters of taste came under heavy scrutiny: “I do my best to follow the exam-

²⁸⁶ “Modern Fiction”, written in 1919 but published in 1921 as part of *Monday or Tuesday*.

ple of my teachers”, Collins wrote with an irony difficult to conceal. “Some of us recklessly take our opinions from others; some of us cautiously keep our opinions to ourselves; and some of us indolently abstain from having anything to do with an opinion at all” (“To Thought, or Be Thought For” 195-197). It was a custom, that of taking opinions from others in matters of art, which had been common practice for long. Frederick Fairlie, Collins’ supercilious aesthete in *The Woman in White*, belonged to that class of teachers whose opinions had been traditionally accepted as undisputed truths. The Esquire of Limmeridge House was a remnant of the “few noblemen and gentlemen of ancient lineage” (Collins, *A Rogue’s Life* 43-44) who supported a tradition of aestheticism summarised by Coleridge in his *Constitution of Church and State* (1826). Coleridge’s proposal of remaining a “certain smaller number ... at the fountainhead of the humanities” (qtd. in Williams, *Culture and Society* 78), later to be refashioned by Thomas Carlyle, inevitably led to that despicable bunch of “critics, connoisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books” scorned by Collins in “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856). Theirs was a Cant of Criticism obnoxious to deal with. However, if Coleridge’s remarks belonged to a time when the effects of capitalist development were only beginning to be fully apprehended, by the time of publication of Collins’ article the commodification of culture was ingrained enough to seem unavoidable. And, inevitably, it led to a questioning of long assumed truths.

The 1850s were characterised by a tremendous tension “between the few who are appointed to teach, and the many who are expected to learn” (Collins, “To Think, or Be Thought For?” 194). Collins, whose early writings had touched upon the ongoing project of aesthetic democracy, further elaborated that tension in *The Woman in White* through Frederick Fairlie, one of the selected few embarked in an impossible educational undertaking with his photographic catalogue for the better benefit of the *barbarians* attending the Institution at Carlisle. The rule of taste proved not so cohesive as previously thought, with the many expecting to learn growing increasingly restive as the years went by. For those contemporary critics who sided with the self-appointed arbiters of taste, and could not afford Fairlie’s flippant attitude towards his social inferiors, the encouragement given to a new aesthetic in painting was, to put it mildly, worrisome. Indeed, what S. C. Hall termed as “the growing wealth and intelligence of British

merchants and manufacturers” (357) proved a force to be reckoned with. The story of Pre-Raphaelitism is also a story of the rising middle class and the pivotal changes brought by the fast spread of capitalism during the mid-century, as Collins quite cunningly hinted to Holman Hunt when praising the *nouveaux riches* for supporting the brethren’s pictorial practice.²⁸⁷ Later on, as the 1860s advanced, and the magnitude of the problem began to be fully understood, voices were raised against the debasement of the rule of taste that followed the crumbling of the old patronage system. It took long, but by the time of publication of Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) the situation, at least from the point of view of a guardian of art orthodoxy as Arnold was, had deteriorated to a point that seemed irreversible. Twenty years back in time, when the plot of *The Woman in White* is set, the prospect of the dethronement of the well-established rule of taste by those supposed to follow the example of their teachers was a mere possibility. A few decades later, however, it had become a painful reality. The authority of the Esquire’s peers only weakened as the mid-century progressed. Arnold’s scathing remarks upon the Barbarians and Philistines who dared to behave as arbiters of taste evinced the complete success of the project of aesthetic democracy in the years that followed the publication of *The Woman in White*.

Two antagonistic conceptions of taste were dealt by Collins in *The Woman in White*, a high-brow one embodied by his over-refined, supercilious aesthete and the more popular represented by the middle class artist Walter Hartright who, towards the end of the novel, finds himself in Ireland drawing “certain forthcoming illustrations [to appear] in the newspaper to which I was attached” (641). Remarkably, when thinking about the chronology of events narrated in *The Woman in White*, the radical switch to a mass media economy experienced by the drawing master and the debasement of the old patronage system embodied by Frederick Fairlie run parallel to the consolidation of suburbia depicted by Collins in *Basil* (1852) as a feature of modern life. Mr Sherwin’s approach to aesthetic consumption, that of a conceited fake connoisseur whose arrogance could not hide his lack of real knowledge on matters of art, posited a threat never faced before by the arbiters of taste. As Collins was quick enough to notice in

²⁸⁷ See Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism* 224.

“Deep Design on Society” (1858), the likes of Mr Sherwin were far from being a curious minority in the commercial mid-century. In fact, they were another instance of what the Esquire of Limmeridge House, with his characteristic mordacity, qualified as the “sad Goths in Art”. Either based at institutions like that of Carlisle or spreading through the growing suburbia encircling the industrial cities of the country, barbarians in the knowledge of art were quite a common feature in mid-century England. The utter ignorance of the lower orders criticised by Fairlie, or the obnoxious taste proudly displayed by a linen draper that so much affected Basil, were telling signs of a new approach towards aesthetic consumption at odds with orthodox notions of highbrow taste. One wonders whether Collins, noticing as he did the debasement of the rule of taste growing in suburbia, did ever realise the implications of his trust in the capabilities of the people to judge by themselves: “I want—if I may be allowed, to repeat my motives once more in the plainest terms—to do all I can to shake the influence of authority in matters of Art, because I see that authority standing drearily and persistently aloof from all popular sympathy” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 197). And there was no better way of questioning that authority than asking intelligent people to have an opinion of their own since, as Collins argued, they had a right “to express their opinions boldly, without the slightest reference to any precedents whatever” (“To Think, or Be Thought For?” 193). In other words, they should reject the authority of self-appointed arbiters of taste who had been a prominent feature of English society—of *good* English society—for long. Collins’ proposal implied a debasement of connoisseurship unthinkable merely a few decades before. And it entailed serious risks. Bereft of precedents, what was to guide mankind when facing a work of art? Those who were obtaining their bread from their labour, as Robert Peel put it, might well have quite a peculiar opinion of their own regarding the value of a painting—or a serialised novel for that matter. It was only a matter of time for the tension between the two aforementioned antagonistic conceptions of taste so cleverly noticed by Collins, the popular and the selective one, to spiral out of control. His trust in the intelligent people to think for themselves could pave the way to Mr Sherwin’s very particular kind of aesthetic appreciation. Unless Collins had in mind a very restrictive understanding of what popular sympathy meant.

In my view, Collins' attack on those still upholding the rules of aesthetic discrimination in the mid-century had been done from the standpoint of a professional writer sustained by a well-informed middle-class public, that of *Household Words*. His request, for those with an "additional sprinkling of intelligence" ("Dramatic Grub Street" 270) amongst theatrical audiences, to guide the opinion of their ignorant neighbours merely reflected the extent of Collins' class bias. He firmly believed that the stage demanded a new breed of arbiters of taste for the better benefit of English drama. In light of this, Collins' call to "intelligent people of any rank to turn a deaf ear to everything that critics, connoisseurs, lecturers, and compilers of guide-books can say to them" ("To Think, or Be Thought For?" 193), democratic as it might sound, was nonetheless a limited one. It might well be that there were enough people with brains in their heads amongst those visiting the National Gallery. But theatre, at least from Collins' point of view, was ruled by a bunch of jesters. There were *publics* and publics, after all. The "unnecessarily offensive" Collins noticed by Dickens was happy enough with his middle-class readership to stick to it, no matter how disgusted he was by some of its particular mores. To find a public with "a certain amount of education beyond the mere faculty of reading printed type" (Dixon 406) was not an easy matter in mid-century England. Much work still needed to be done on the common people for their better improvement. And it was being done, perhaps not to Collins' thorough acquaintance. What he thought of the Art Treasures Exhibition cannot be told, although most probably the distrust of his colleagues regarding the outcome of the event was not lost upon him. Conventionality and claptrap were never easy to shake off from the popular mind. Arguably, the aesthetic fallacy mentioned by *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, that of the disastrous consequences of an individual taste, did not bother Collins at all, maybe, I think, because he never really thought of the likes of Mr Sherwin as having a sprinkling of intelligence in their minds. They might not, but one thing they did not lack: ambition enough to climb the social ladder at no matter what cost. It was all too well to ask the National Gallery to forsake the authority of connoisseurs and buy a collection of pictures "for us ... mere mankind" (Collins, "To Think, or Be Thought For?" 197-198). But what mere mankind meant for Collins in 1856 was to change drastically as the decades went by, his cherished "freedom of thought on the subject of the Fine Arts" (Collins, *My Miscellanies* 193) eventually being claimed by the many Mr Sherwins benefitting from capitalist development.

Slowly, linen drapers were to grow in importance to such an extent that even the aristocracy of money, these merchant princes behind the rise of Pre-Raphaelitism, will have motives enough to be worried about. Collins' fictional Mr Reader in "Dramatic Grub Street" (1858) forecasted, I think, the dangers of aesthetic democracy when jokingly endorsing the right of his footman to enjoy a theatrical performance alongside his master. Had Collins reflected deeper he would have realised how serious the situation was. Later on, when his career had turned to the serialisation of fiction in northern newspapers, he lambasted their owners as "curious savages" (qtd. in *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* 2: 442) incapable—or unwilling—of behaving like gentlemen in their dealings with a recognised professional of the pen. But these savages were merely expressing their opinions boldly, without the slightest reference to any precedents. They well knew that the commodity-text proposed by Collins did no suit the footman's peculiar taste and naturally complained in earnest. He, who had had the insight of forecasting the progressive democratisation of the literary market, was shocked by the demands of the press magnates—his literary commodities, once widely appreciated by the readers of *Household Words* and later *All the Year Round*, now deemed unsuitable for the readership of the northern newspapers. Collins seemingly did not realise that he was dealing with an audience closer to the unknown public of his youth than the respectable and well-educated readership of Dickens' magazines. He was experiencing his desired revolution in the publishing trade mentioned to George Smith, and he failed to notice it. Virginia Woolf, casting a backward glance, knew better. The Collins of the early 1870s was still shackled by his mid-century understanding of the literary market. His was an utter misapprehension at odds with the cunning young writer who had the foresight, when starting his career in the field of letters, of predicting the immediate dismissal of the self-appointed arbiters of taste. That was a revolution that did not take Collins by surprise.

Frederick Fairlie's aestheticism in *The Woman in White*, a restricted approach to beauty indebted to the eighteenth century, could not be reconciled with the needs of an evolving culture of consumption which favoured the lustre of mass-produced commodities. Collins' early writings were thoroughly indebted to a decade, that of the 1850s, when people dared to question orthodoxies long taken for granted. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, it is worth bearing in mind, was published only a few days ahead of the first instalment of *The*

Woman in White in *All the Year Round*. The freedom of thought requested by Collins for the Fine Arts was extending to the sciences. Actually, it had been doing so for quite a while with an important essay on evolution theory by Herbert Spencer, “The Development Hypothesis” (1852), printed by *The Leader*, the leftist weekly journal to which Collins contributed regularly until joining the staff of *Household Words*. His blunt contempt towards the “virtuously inflammable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times” (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* 1: 83) does not come as a surprise when bearing in mind the newspaper’s commitment to social and political reform. In my view, Collins’ early acquaintance with the artistic circles of the capital has obscured his involvement with progressive intellectuals and activists at the very beginning of his literary career. His essays and reviews for *The Leader* still await to be thoroughly researched and might well be the basis for further post-doctoral work on the topic discussed in this dissertation. Indeed, as Collins put it, the nation got a new life during the mid-century. A wave of revolutions had swallowed most of the continent in 1848, just at the very beginning of his literary career, and, only three years later, England was to herald to the world the glories of capitalism with a gigantic exhibition of industrial prowess to be followed by an astounding showcase of works of art for the better benefit of the people at large. Collins was inevitably affected by the new understanding of beauty that developed alongside capitalist development. As I said in the Introduction, his early writings show the extent to which art appreciation was being refashioned by a growing commercial society dismissive of inherited opinions on aesthetic matters. Men devoted to the contemplation of beautiful things like the Esquire of Limmeridge House were relics of a bygone epoch, remnants of a time when knowledge of art was confined to a very limited and selected circle. It was necessary to move forward. It was necessary to change as the country was changing. Collins’ cherished freedom of thought demanded so. The time for self-appointed arbiters of taste to rule over impressionable minds had come to an end.

WORKS CITED

- A Catalogue of the Pictures, Drawings, Etchings, &c. in the British Fine Art Collections deposited in the New Gallery, South Kensington. Being for the most part the gift of John Sheepshanks, Esq.* George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1859.
- A Handbook to the Gallery of British Paintings in the Art Treasures Exhibition: being a reprint of critical notices originally published in the "Manchester Guardian."* London, 1857.
- A Peep at the Pictures; or, a Catalogue of the principal objects of attraction in the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition, with biographical notices of the painters, ancient and modern, and a ground plan of the building.* John Heywood, 1857.
- Altick, Richard D. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900.* The University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- . *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature.* W. W. Norton and Company, 1973.
- Ames, Winslow. *Prince Albert and Victorian Taste.* Chapman & Hall, 1967.
- Andres, Sophia. *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries.* The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
- Anglo, Michael. *Penny Dreadfuls and Other Victorian Horrors.* Jupiter Books, 1977.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition.* The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy.* Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Aslin, Elizabeth. *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau.* Elek, 1969.
- Atkinson, Joseph Beavington. "Manchester Exhibition of Art-Treasures.—The English School and its Tendencies." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1857, pp. 156-176.
- Auerbach, Enrich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* 1946. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Baker, William. *Wilkie Collins' Library: A Reconstruction.* Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.* Translated by Caryl Emerson. University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Barringer, Tim. "An Antidote to Mechanical Poison: John Ruskin, Photography, and Early Pre-Raphaelite Painting." *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*, edited by Diane Waggoner, National Gallery of Art, 2010, pp. 18-31.

- . *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*. Yale University Press, 2012.
- Bartram, Michael. *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera. Aspects of Victorian Photography*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985.
- Beebe, Maurice. *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce*. New York University Press, 1964.
- Beetz, Kirk H. "Wilkie Collins and 'The Leader'." *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1982, pp. 20-29.
- Bell, Bill. "Fiction in the Marketplace: Towards a Study of the Victorian Serial." *Serials and Their Readers: 1620-1914*, edited by Robyn Myers and Michael Harris, St Paul Bibliographies, 1993, pp. 125-144.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography." *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 274-298.
- . "Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on 'The Flâneur' Section of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.'" *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings. Volume 4. 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 200-214.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version." *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings. Volume 4. 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 251-283.
- . "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings. Volume 4. 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 313-355.
- Bewes, Timothy. *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 2002.
- Blanchard, Edward. L *The Mysteries of London. Lights and Shadows of London Life*. Vol. VI. George Vickers, 1850.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Polity Press, 1993.
- Brake, Laurel. *Print in Transition: Studies in Media and Book History*. Palgrave, 2001.
- Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Harper Collins, 1997.

- Briggs, Asa. *Victorian Cities*. Penguin, 1968.
- . *Victorian People. A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851-1867*. Penguin, 1990.
- . *Victorian Things*. Penguin, 1990.
- Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1951.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. *Pelham; or, the adventures of a Gentleman*. Henry Colburn, 1828.
- Busst, A. J. L. "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century." *Romantic Mythologies*, edited by Ian Fletcher, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 1-95.
- Butt, John, and Kathleen Tillotson. *Dickens at Work*. Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1957.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. James Fraser, 1834.
- Ceraldi, Gabrielle. "The Crystal Palace, Imperialism, and the 'Struggle for Existence': Victorian Evolutionary Discourse in Collin's *The Woman in White*." *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox, The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp. 173-194.
- Chapman, Charles. *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society. 1832-1901*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968.
- Chapman, John. *Cheap Books, and How to Get Them. Being a Reprint, from the Westminster Review for April, 1852, of the Article on "The Commerce of Literature"*. John Chapman, 1852.
- Chapman, Raymond. *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*. Croom Helm, 1986.
- Clarke, William M. *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*. Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1996.
- Collins, A. S. *The Profession of Letters: A Study of the Relation of Author to Patron, Publisher, and Public, 1780-1832*. George Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1928.
- Collins, Richard. "Marian's Moustache. Bearded Ladies, Hermaphrodites, and Intersexual Collage in *The Woman in White*." *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox, The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp. 131-172.

- Collins, Wilkie. "A Passage in the Life of Mr. Perugino Potts. Extracted, by Permission, From the Italian Journal of Mr. P. P." *Bentley's Miscellany*, XXXI, 1852, pp. 153-164.
- . "A Petition to the Novel-Writers." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 6 December 1856, pp. 347-348.
- . "A Plea for Sunday Reform." *The Leader*, 27 September 1851, pp. 925-926.
- . *A Rogue's Life*. Dover Publications, Inc, 1985.
- . *Antonina; or, the Fall of Rome. A Romance of the Fifth Century*. Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1861.
- . *Armada*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Basil*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . "Deep Design on Society." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 2 January 1858, pp. 49-53.
- . "Doctor Dulcamara, M. P." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 18 December 1858, pp. 49-52.
- . "Dramatic Grub Street. Explored in Two Letters." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 6 March 1858, pp. 265-270.
- . *Heart and Science*. Broadview Press, 1996.
- . *Hide and Seek*. Dover Publications Inc, 1981.
- . "Highly Proper!" *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 2 October 1858, pp. 361-363.
- . "How I Write My Books: Related in a Letter to a Friend." *The Globe*, 26 November 188, pp. 511-514.
- . *Man and Wife*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq.* R.A. Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans. 1848.
- . *My Miscellanies*. Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1863.
- . *No Name*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Rambles Beyond Railways; or, Notes in Cornwall Taken A-Foot*. Richard Bentley, 1851.
- . "Reminiscences of a Story-teller." *The Universal Review*, 15 June 1888, pp. 182-192.
- . "Strike!" *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 6 February 1858, pp. 169-172.
- . *The Evil Genius*. Broadview Press, 1994.

- . "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy." *Bentley's Miscellany*, XXIX, 1851, pp. 617-627.
- . *The Law and the Lady*. Chatto & Windus, 1898.
- . *The Letters of Wilkie Collins. Volume 1. 1838-1865*. Edited by William Baker and William M. Clarke, MacMillan Press, 1999.
- . *The Letters of Wilkie Collins. Volume 2. 1866-1889*. Edited by William Baker and William M. Clarke, MacMillan Press, 1999.
- . *The Moonstone*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . "The National Gallery and the Old Masters." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 25 October 1856, pp. 347-348.
- . "The Picture-Galleries of England. The Earl of Ellesmere's Collection." *Bentley's Miscellany*, 1851, pp. 78-87.
- . "The Picture-Galleries of England. Northumberland House and Syon House." *Bentley's Miscellany*, 1851, pp. 163-173.
- . "The Picture-Galleries of England. The Dulwich Gallery." *Bentley's Miscellany*, 1851, pp. 344-352.
- . *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters. Volume I. Letters 1831-1864*. Edited by William Baker et al., Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- . *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters. Volume II. Letters 1865-1873*. Edited by William Baker et al., Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- . *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters. Volume III. Letters 1874-1883*. Edited by William Baker et al., Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- . *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters. Volume IV. Letters 1884-1889*. Edited by William Baker et al., Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- . "To Think, or Be Thought For?" *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 13 September 1856, pp. 193-198.
- . "The Unknown Public." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 21 August 1858, pp. 217-222.
- . *The Woman in White*. Oxford University Press. 2008.
- Compton-Rickett, Arthur. *A History of English Literature*. T. C. & E. C. Jack, Limited, 1920.

- Conlin, Jonathan. *The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery*. Pallas Athene, 2006.
- Connery, Brian A. and Kirk Combe. "Theorizing Satire: A Retrospective and Introduction." *Theorizing Satire. Essays in Literary Criticism*, edited by Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe, St Martin's Press, 1995, pp. 1-15.
- Cruse, Amy. *The Victorians and Their Books*. George Allen & Unwin, 1935.
- Davis, Frank. *Victorian Patrons of the Arts: Twelve Famous Collections and Their Owners*. Country Life Limited, 1963.
- Dickens, Charles. "A Preliminary Word." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 30 March 1850, pp. 1-2.
- . "Old Lamps for New Ones." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 15 June 1850, pp. 265-267.
- . *The Pickwick Papers*. Random House Everyman's Library, 1998.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens. Volume Six: 1850-1852*. Edited by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens. Volume Seven: 1853-1855*. Edited by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens. Volume Eight: 1856-1858*. Edited by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995.
- . *The Letters of Charles Dickens. Volume Eleven: 1865-1867*. Edited by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999.
- Dickens, Charles, and Wilkie Collins. "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. In Five Chapters. Chapter the First." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 3 October 1857, pp. 313-319.
- . "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. In Five Chapters. Chapter the Second." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 10 October 1857, pp. 337-349.
- . "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. In Five Chapters. Chapter the Third." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 17 October 1857, pp. 361-367.
- . "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. In Five Chapters. Chapter the Fourth." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 24 October 1857, pp. 385-393.

- . "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. In Five Chapters. Chapter the Fifth." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 31 October 1857, pp. 409-416.
- Dickens, Charles, and Richard H. Horne. "The Great Exhibition and the Little One." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 5 July 1851, pp. 356-360.
- Dixon, Edmund Saul. "Literary Small Change." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 9 October 1858, pp. 404-408.
- Dolin, Tim. "Collins' Career and the Visual Arts." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 7-22.
- Dolin, Tim, and Lucy Dougan. "Fatal Newness: Basil, Art, and the Origins of Sensation Fiction." *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox, The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp. 1-33.
- Dowling, Linda. *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and the Aesthetic Democracy*. The University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Dyos, H. J. *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*. Leicester University Press, 1961.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Literature: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Verso, 2006.
- . *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- Eastlake, Lady Elizabeth. "Photography." *The Quarterly Review*, 1857, pp. 442-468.
- Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*, vol. 1. William Blackwood and Sons, 1859.
- Eliot, T. S. "Wilkie Collins and Dickens." *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, edited by Frances Dickey et al., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, pp. 164-174.
- "Exhibition of the Royal Academy." *The Times*, 3 May 1851.
- Feltes, N. N. *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*. The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- "Fine Arts: Royal Academy." *The Athenaeum*, 22 May 1852, pp. 581-583.
- Flint, Kate. "Reading *The Awakening Conscience* rightly." *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed*, edited by Marcia Pointon, Manchester University Press, 1989, pp. 45-65.
- Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture*. Stanford University Press, 1990.

- Frow, John. *Marxism and Literary History*. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Gernsheim, Helmut. *The Origins of Photography*. Thames and Hudson, 1982.
- . *The Rise of Photography. 1850-1880. The Age of Collodion*. Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Gilmore, Dehn. *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Gissing, George. *New Grub Street*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Godwin, George. *London Shadows; A Glance at the "Homes" of the Thousands*. George Routledge & Co., 1854.
- Griest, Guinevere L. *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*. Indiana University Press, 1970.
- Hall, S. C. *Retrospect of a Long Life: From 1815 to 1883*. Vol. 1, Richard Bentley & Son, 1883.
- Hamerton, Philip Gilbert. *Thoughts about Art*. MacMillan and Co., 1873.
- Hamilton, Walter. *The Aesthetic Movement in England*. Reeves & Turner, 1882.
- Harvey, Michael. "Ruskin and Photography." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1984, pp. 25-33.
- Hauser, Arnold. *The Social History of Art. Volume III. Rococo, Classicism and Romanticism*. Routledge, 1999.
- . *The Social History of Art. Volume IV. Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age*. Routledge, 1999.
- Hazzlit, William. "'Vivian Grey' and the Dandy School." *William Hazlitt, Essayist and Critic: Selections from his Writings with a Memoir, Biographical and Critical*, edited by Alexander Ireland, Frederick Warne and Co., 1889, pp. 330-334.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Capital. 1848-1875*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975.
- Hosmon, Robert Stahr. *The Germ: A Pre-Raphaelite Little Magazine*. University of Miami Press, 1970.
- Hunt, William Holman. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1913.
- Hurley, Kelly. "British Gothic fiction, 1885-1930." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 189-207.

- Inventory of the pictures, drawings, etchings &c. in the British Fine Arts Collections deposited in the new gallery at Cromwell Gardens, South Kensington: being for the most art the gift of John Sheepshanks, Esq.* Victoria and Albert Museum, 1857.
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of Lady*. Macmillan and Co., 1882.
- . *The Tragic Muse*. Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948.
- James, Louis. *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850: A Study of the Literature Produced for the Working Classes in Early Victorian Urban England*. Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Jameson, Anne Brownell. *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts*. Longman, Brown, Green and Co., 1852.
- Jennings, Michael. "Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde." *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, edited by David S. Ferris, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 18-34.
- Kermode, Frank. *History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcliffe Lectures*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Kimball, Roger. *Experiments against Reality: The Fate of Culture in the Postmodern Age*. Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- King, Andrew. "Penny Fiction Periodicals." *Companion to Victorian Popular Fiction*, edited by Kevin A. Morrison, McFarland & Company, 2018, pp. 186-188.
- Kingsley, Charles. *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet: An Autobiography*. Oxford University Press, 1983.
- . "The National Gallery.—Nº I." *Politics for the People*, 6 May 1848, pp. 5-6.
- . "The National Gallery.—Nº II." *Politics for the People*, 20 May 1848, pp. 33-48.
- . "The British Museum." *Politics for the People*, 1 July 1848, pp. 175-192.
- . *Yeast: A Problem*. Macmillan and Co., 1879.
- Landow, George P. "There Began to Be a Great Talking about the Fine Arts." *The Mind and Art of Victorian England*, edited by Josef L. Altholz, The University of Minnesota Press, 1976, pp. 124-145.

- Law, Graham. "Collins on International Copyright: From 'A National Wrong' (1870) to 'Considerations' (1880)." *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by Andrew Mangham, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 178-194.
- . "Periodicals and Syndication." *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by William Baker and Kenneth Womack, Greenwood Press, 2002, pp. 15-28.
- . "Sensation Fiction and the Publishing Industry." *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, edited by Andrew Mangham, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 168-181.
- . "The Professional Writer and the Literary Marketplace." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 97-111.
- . "Wilkie Collins and the Discovery of an 'Unknown Public.'" *Journalism and the Periodical Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, edited by Joanne Shattock, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 328-340.
- . "Yesterday's Sensations: Modes of Publication and Narrative Form in Collins's Late Novels." *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, edited by Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox, The University of Tennessee Press, 2003, pp. 34-58.
- Law, Graham and Andrew Maunder. *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Layard, A. H. "Manchester Exhibition", *The Quarterly Review*, July 1857, pp. 165-204.
- Leavis, Q. D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Chatto & Windus, 1968.
- Lohrli, Anne. *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859 Conducted by Charles Dickens*. University of Toronto Press, 1973.
- Lycett, Andrew. *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*. Random House, 2013.
- "Middle-Class Education in England." *The Cornhill Magazine*, October 1864, pp. 409-426.
- Millais, John Guille. *The Life and Letters of John Everett Millais*. Vol. 1. Methuen, 1899.
- Minihan, Janet. *The Nationalization of Culture: The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain*. Hamish Hamilton, 1977.
- Moers, Ellen. *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*. The Viking Press, 1960.

- Morley, Henry. "A House Full of Horrors". *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 4 December 1852, pp. 265-270.
- . "Men Made by Machinery." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 31 January 1857, pp. 97-100.
- . "Prattleton's Monday Out." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 5 December 1857, pp. 537-540.
- Murdoch, John. "George Eliot and the Pre-Raphaelites." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 37, 1974, pp. 313-329
- Nayder, Lillian. *Unequal Partners: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Victorian Authorship*. Cornell University Press, 2002.
- "New Photographic Work of the Arundel Society." *The Art Journal*, January 1869, LXXXV, p. 26.
- Oliphant, Margaret. "Sensation Novels." *Blackwood Magazine*, May 1862, pp. 564-584.
- Owen, Robert. *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System: with Hints for the Improvement of Those Parts of it Which Are Most Injurious to Health and Morals*, 1815, <http://books.google.co.uk>. Accessed 26 October 2018.
- Page, Norman. *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.
- Pater, Walter. *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style*. MacMillan and Co., 1889.
- . *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Pergam, Elizabeth A. *The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857: Entrepreneurs, Connoisseurs and the Public*. Ashgate, 2011.
- Peters, Catherine. *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*. Minerva, 1992.
- Philips, Walter C. *Dickens, Reade and Collins, Sensation Novelists: A Study in the Conditions and Theories of Novel Writing in Victorian England*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1919.
- Pierrot, Jean. *The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900*. The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Porter, George Richardson. *The Progress of the Nation, in its various social and economical relations, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present time*. John Murray, 1851.
- Porter, Roy. *London: A Social History*. Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

- Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Press, Thomas Peckett. *Ela, the Outcast or, the Gypsy of Rosemary Dell. A Romance of Thrilling Interest*. E. Lloyd, 1841.
- Prettejohn, Liz. "Aesthetic Value and Art Criticism." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2.1, 1997, pp. 71-94.
- Price List of the Reproductions of Works of Art by Means of Photography, Electrotyping, Casting, &c. Selected from the South Kensington Museum, and from Various Other Public and Private Collections: Produced for the Use of Schools of Art and Public Instruction Generally, with A Historical Sketch of the Cartoons of Raffaele at Hampton Court, and Descriptive Notices of Other Works in the Series of Photographs*. George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1860.
- "Prospectus." *Politics for the People*, 6 May 1848, pp. 1-2.
- Pykett, Lyn. "Collins and the Sensation Novel." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 50-64.
- . *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel*. Northcote, 2011.
- . *Wilkie Collins*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Reebe, Wybert. "Recollections of Wilkie Collins". *Chambers's Journal*, 16 June 1906, pp. 458-461.
- Reynolds, Joshua. *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds: Illustrated by Explanatory Notes and Plates by John Burnett, F.R.S.* James Carpenter, 1842.
- . *Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. Edited by Frederick Hilles, Cambridge University Press, 1929.
- Robinson, Kenneth. *Wilkie Collins: A Biography*. The Bodley Head, 1951.
- Rossetti, William Michael. *Dante Michael Rossetti. With a Memoir*. Ellis & Elvey, 1895.
- Ruskin, John. "Letter to the Editor." *The Times*, 13 May 1851, pp. 8-9.
- . "Letter to the Editor." *The Times*, 30 May 1851, p. 8.
- . *Pre-Raphaelitism*. Smith, Elder, and Co., 1851.
- . *Pre-Raphaelitism: Lectures on Architecture & Painting and Critical Notes*. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1907.
- . *Selected Writings*. Oxford World's Classics, 2004.

- . *The Political Economy of Art: being the substance, with additions, of two lectures delivered at Manchester*. Smith & Elder, 1857.
- Sambrook, James. *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays*. The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Schaffer, Thalia. "The Victorian Novel and the New Woman". *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, edited by Lisa Rodensky, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 729-745.
- Schwarzbach, F. S. "Newgate Novel to Detective Fiction." *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, pp. 227-243.
- Seiler, R. M. *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, Etc.* Edited by John M. Robertson, Grant Richards, 1900, 2 vols.
- . *Second Characters or the Language of Forms*. Edited by Benjamin Rand, Cambridge University Press, 1914.
- Smith, John Store. *Social Aspects*. Chapman, 1850.
- Smith, Lindsay. "The Elusive Depth of Field: Stereoscopy and the Pre-Raphaelites." *Pre-Raphaelites Reviewed*, edited by Marcia Pointon, Manchester University Press, 1989, pp. 83-99.
- Steezman, John. *Consort of Taste: 1830-1870*. Sidgwick and Jackson Limited, 1950.
- . *The Rule of Taste: From George I to George IV*. MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1936.
- Stone, W. H. "The Nineveh Bull." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 8 February 1851, pp. 468-469.
- Sutherland, J. A. *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- . *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*. The University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Taylor, Jenny Bourne. *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, sensation narrative, and nineteenth-century psychology*. Routledge, 1988.
- . "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 1-6.
- Tennyson, G. B., editor. *A Carlyle Reader. Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

- Thackeray, William Makepeace. "Going to See a Man Hanged". *A Shabby Genteel Story and Other Writings*, edited by D. J. Taylor, Everyman, 1993, pp. 110-125.
- . "Half-a-Crown's worth of Cheap Knowledge." *Fraser's Magazine*, March 1838, pp. 279-290.
- . "Horae Catnachianae. A Dissertation on Ballads, With a Few Unnecessary Remarks on Jonathan Wild, John Sheppard, Paul Clifford, and—Fagin, Esqrs." *Fraser's Magazine*, April 1839, pp. 407-424.
- . "Letters on the Fine Arts. N° 1: The Art Unions." *Stray Papers by William Makepeace Thackeray. Being Stories, Reviews, Verses and Sketches (1821-1847)*, edited by Lewis Melville, Hutchinson and Co, 1901, pp. 197-202.
- . "Letters on the Fine Arts. N° 2: The Objections Against Art Unions." *Stray Papers by William Makepeace Thackeray. Being Stories, Reviews, Verses and Sketches (1821-1847)*, edited by Lewis Melville, Hutchinson and Co, 1901, pp. 204-211.
- . *Papers by Mr. Yellowplush, Sometime Footman in Many Genteel Families*. Baudry's European Library, 1841.
- . *The History of Pendennis*. Penguin, 1986.
- . *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray in Twelve Volumes. Volume X*. Smith, Elder, & Co., 1882.
- . *The Yellowplush Correspondence*. E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1838
- The Art-Treasures Examiner: A Pictorial, Critical, and Historical Record of the Art-Treasures Exhibition, at Manchester, in 1857*. Alexander Ireland & Co., 1857.
- The Journal of Design and Manufactures. With Twenty-Five Fabric Patterns Inserted and Numerous Engravings*. Chapman and Hall, 1852.
- "The Pre-Raffaellites." *The Art Journal*. July 1851, pp. 185-186.
- Thoms, Peter. "Escaping the Plot: The Quest for Selfhood in *The Woman in White*." *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments*, edited by Nelson Smith and R. C. Terry, AMS Press, pp. 183-207.
- Thrall, Miriam M. H. *Rebellious Fraser's: Noel Yorke's Magazine in the Days of Maginn, Thackeray, and Carlyle*. Morningside Heights, 1934.
- Tillotson, Geoffrey, and Kathleen Tillotson. *Mid-Victorian Studies*. The Athlone Press, 1965.

- Timbs, John. *Things Not Generally Known, Familiarly Explained. A Book for old and Young*. David Boguem, 1856.
- Todd, Janet. *Sensibility: An Introduction*. Routledge, 1986.
- Trodd, Anthea. "The Early Writing." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 23-36.
- Trollope, Anthony. *An Autobiography*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Waggoner, Diane. "Uncompromising Truth: Photography and Pre-Raphaelitism." *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*, edited by Diane Waggoner, National Gallery of Art, 2010, pp. 1-15.
- Warner, Malcom. "The Pre-Raphaelites and the National Gallery." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-11.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary*. Picador, 1976.
- Waters, Catherine. *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words: The Social Life of Goods*. Ashgate, 2008.
- Werner, Marcia. *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. Penguin Books, 1976.
- . *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. 1976. Columbia University Press, 1983.
- . *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Fontana, 1976.
- . *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- . *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence*. Chatto and Windus, 1970.
- Wills, W. H. "The Manchester School of Art." *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, 10 October 1857, pp. 349-352.
- Wittkower, Rudolph and Margot. *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists - A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*. W. W. Norton & Co., 1969.
- Wohl, Anthony S. "Introduction." *The Victorian Family. Structure and Stresses*, edited by Anthony S. Wohl, St. Martin Press, 1978, pp. 9-19.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Selected Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

---. *Beau Brummell*. Rimington & Hooper, 1930.

Yates, Edmund. *Celebrities at Home: Reprinted from "The World". Third Series*. Robson and Sons, 1879.

Yonge, Charlotte. *The Heir of Redclyffe*. John W. Parker & Son, 1853.

RESUMO

Wilkie Collins converteuse nun dos escritores máis coñecidos da época victoriana coa publicación de *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), cuxa enorme popularidade mesmo inaugurou o xénero literario coñecido como “sensation fiction” caracterizado por asasinatos, duplas identidades e *femme fatales*. Con razón Catherine Peters sinalou, na súa biografía *The King of Inventors* (1992), como Collins era considerado polo público victoriano un escritor de complexas novelas de discutíbel temática. Mais Collins tiña una larga obra publicada anterior a *The Woman in White* que mostra o grande interese do autor polas mudanzas que estaban a afectar a sociedade victoriana do momento. Ben axuntándose coa bohemia da capital, os seus amigos do movemento pre-rafaelita, ou ben formando parte dos íntimos colaboradores de Charles Dickens, Collins nunca viveu alleo aos acontecementos que fixeron de 1850 unha das décadas máis importantes do século dezanove inglés. Como ben ten sinalado Tim Dolin en “Collins’ Career and the Visual Arts” (2006), os anos de Collins no mundo artístico e literario de Londres influíron grandemente na súa posterior carreira como escritor profesional. Mais eses anos, a pesar da súa grande importancia, non teñen sido analisados no seu conxunto sendo un tanto ignorados por mor do éxito das grandes novelas de Collins publicadas durante a década de 1860. Este é un erro que a presente tese de doutoramento tenta rectificar.

Fillo dun recoñecido pintor membro da Royal Academy, Collins sempre mostrou un profundo interese polo xeito de a arte e a literatura do momento seren entendidas polo público—un público que estaba a sufrir as consecuencias da forte industrialización da Inglaterra con profundas mudanzas para a estrutura da sociedade inglesa. Lonxe de apoiar unha interpretación elitista do gusto estético propia do século dezaioito, Collins mostrouse favorábel a un entendemento do mesmo máis democrático que aristocrático. O seu foi un posicionamento, con matices, semellante ao da irmandade pre-rafaelita cuxa nacemento e posterior esgazamento el mesmo viveu ben de perto. Artigos de Collins como “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), “The National Gallery and the Old Masters” (1856) ou “The Unknown Public” (1858), e novelas como *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852), entre outras, mostran un autor favorábel á democratización do gusto estético contrario ao control aínda exercido por unha minoría de connoisseurs no *mid-century* victoriano. A escrita de Collins durante a década de 1850 permite ao lector se achegar a unha Inglaterra complexa, consciente o novo es-

critor de estar a contemplar a consolidación dunha nova sociedade onde a beleza ía deixar de ser un patrimonio exclusivo da clase aristocrática para ser un dereito democrático.

Collins desenvolveu a súa carreira literaria baixo un sistema de produción capitalista que influenciou grandemente o desenvolvemento da literatura inglesa. Autores como N. N. Feltes en *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (1986) ou Terry Eagleton en *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) teñen sinalado as particularidades da ficción publicada durante o reinado da raíña Victoria, o autor segundo Eagleton ben podendo ser considerado como un produtor de mercadorías literarias cuxa interacción cos seus clientes (leitores) está condicionada por aqueles que controlan os canais de comercialización. De feito, o que Feltes chamou “commodity-text”, o texto producido por un autor dentro dun determinado sistema capitalista e afectado por unha estrutura de medios e relacións de produción, foi de grande axuda para analizar a escrita de Collins, un dos moitos escritores (i escritoras) que desenvolveron a súa actividade profesional baixo un sistema de produción capitalista dependente dunha clase media en expansión. A escrita de ficción na época victoriana, especialmente no *mid-century*, era resultado dun complexo sistema de produción, distribución e consumo. Por tanto, precisamente pola presente tese de doutoramento estar focada no xeito de Collins reflectir as mudanzas no gusto estético durante a década de 1850, foi preciso analizar o ambiente sociocultural e mesmo material arredor del. A escrita de Collins anterior a *The Woman in White* (1859-1860) mostra un escritor completamente consciente dos debates culturais e políticos do momento, e paseniñamente seguro da súa profesionalidade como autor. Lendo atentamente a súa ficción, artigos e correspondencia, *The Woman in White* ben pode ser interpretada como a culminación da etapa de xuventude de Collins, unha etapa onde o novo escritor mostrou un profundo interese polo gusto estético entendido como un dereito democrático, e non como un privilexio dun minoría. Porén, aínda que a presente tese de doutoramento trata dunha década determinada, principiando en 1849 cando Collins publicou a biografía do seu pai e rematando en 1859 coa publicación de *The Woman in White* nas páxinas de *All the Year Round*, esta limitación cronolóxica non significa desbotar a posterior obra literaria (e non literaria) de Collins a cal foi ben abonadosa chegando até mesmo a última década do século dezanove. Deste xeito, a carreira profesional de Collins desenvolveuse entre o esfarelamento do sistema de patronaxe herdado do

século dezaioito e a emerxencia dun mercado de ficción para as masas que caracterizou os seus últimos anos como escritor profesional.

Mais, como a tese de doutoramento mostrou, con *The Woman in White* remata toda unha década de cavilacións en cuestións estéticas a cal, que eu saiba, nunca foi analisada no seu conxunto. Collins, como sinaliei, publicou os seus primeiros escritos cando a irmandade pre-rafaelita estaba a cuestionar o canon da pintura inglesa. Como mostra o Capítulo I, a súa foi unha opinión canto a importancia do novo movemento artístico, expresada no seu artigo “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy” (1851), un tanto de seu e discordante coa de outros críticos do momento. O individualismo de Collins, e a influencia do pre-rafaelitismo, mostrouse de novo en *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852), novela onde se foca o Capítulo II. En *Basil*, o novo escritor reflectiu as mudanzas que a sociedade inglesa do momento estaba a sufrir por mor dun sistema capitalista aparentemente sen control—i entre esas mudanzas, a paseniña democratización do gusto estético. Collins, como mostra o Capítulo III, aprofundou neste seu interese nas súas seguintes novelas, *Hide and Seek* (1854) e *A Rogue’s Life* (1856), e, sobre todo, no seu artigo “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856). O Capítulo IV mostra a importancia deste artigo por fornecer unha sorte de declaración en prol dunha democracia estética a cal necesariamente implicaba o rexeitamento do elitista gusto artístico que tiña sido considerado como o único válido durante décadas. Collins achou a sociedade de 1850 necesitada de novos valores estéticos, valores que non podían seren derivados dun feixe de connoisseurs auto-proclamados mestres en cuestións de apreciación artística. Os tempos serán chegados, Collins pensou, para todos aqueles ignorantes do gran valor da arte milloraren o seu coñecemento e, algún día, se converteren en novos mestres dun novo entendemento do gusto estético. Certamente acontecementos como a Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition de 1857, da que trata o Capítulo V, confirmaron en certa medida as sospeitas de Collins. Unha extraordinaria xuntanza de obras de arte, a exhibición tiña como principal obxectivo millorar o coñecemento estético dunha clase media falta dunha mínima educación artística. Este novo público foi obxecto de atención por parte de Collins no seu artigo “The Unknown Public” (1858). O Capítulo VI amosa como Collins, sendo un escritor para a clase media, era no entanto consciente dun mercado literario para as clases populares descoñecido para moitos dos seus compañeiros da escrita. Mais, sendo ignorado polo *establishment* cultural, este público lector dunha ficción de

escasa calidade era para Collins de vital importancia para o futuro da literatura inglesa e, necesariamente, do gusto estético. Como sinalai no devandito capítulo, Collins mesmo utilizou características desta ficción na primeira das súas grandes novelas. O Capítulo VI fôcase en *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), entendéndoa como o resultado de toda a obra previa de Collins. A serialización de *The Woman in White* na nova revista literaria de Charles Dickens, *All the Year Round*, foi todo un éxito non sen consecuencias. Moitos acharon a novela como unha grande obra de ficción. Outros, no entanto, axiron dun xeito non tan favorábel. Sendo unha produción literaria para a clase media, *The Woman in White* foi porén fortemente influenciada pola ficción dos *penny journals* analisados por Collins en “The Unknown Public” (1858). Dous anos pasaran desde a exhibición de Manchester cando Collins principiou a publicación de *The Woman in White*. O gusto estético experimentara profundas mudanzas, o público non tendo fiúza nengunha nas opinións dun feixe de connoisseurs de atitude paternalista cara ás ignorantes masas. A sociedade inglesa mudara radicalmente na década de 1850 con Frederick Fairlie, o esteta de *The Woman in White*, sendo unha sorte de reliquia dun tempo pasado onde unha presada de homes tiña poder dabondo para decidiren a norma de gusto estético. O desenvolvemento do sistema capitalista produciu a paseniña consolidación dunha clase media farta de ser ensinada como interpretar obras de arte. Foi nese momento, cando aqueles tradicionalmente excluídos dos praceres da contemplación estética rexeitaron seren adoutrinados polos seus superiores, cando a democracia do gusto estético fixose realidade—o pesadelo que o editor de *The Journal of Design and Manufactures* chamou a falacia de “Every one to his own taste”. Collins tratou esa mesma problemática na súa novela co seu esteta Fairlie, un daqueles abenzoados co coñecemento do que era a beleza e que principiou a imposible tarefa de millorar a educación estética dos bárbaros da “Institution at Carlisle” totalmente carentes do máis básico coñecemento artístico. Fairlie, se non axir, ben podería encontrarse co perigo de ter un público cada vez máis seguro das súas propias opinións canto o verdadeiro valor da arte. Ese era precisamente un perigo evidente in 1859 cando Collins principiou a publicación de *The Woman in White*. Homes como Frederick Fairlie, adicados toda a súa vida á contemplación de obxectos preciosos, simplemente non tiñan lugar na Inglaterra de 1850. Collins entendeu a febleza dunha regra do gusto estético baixo fortes presións por mor dunha clase media cuxos membros repararon na súa crecente importancia dentro da so-

cidade victoriana. Neste sentido, a historia do movemento pre-rafaelita é unha das moitas consecuencias imprevistas do extraordinario espallamento do sistema capitalista, como Collins ben atinadamente sinalou a Holman Hunt cando gabou aos *nouveaux riches* por apoiaren á irmandade coa compra dos seus cadros. A popularización do gusto estético é outra desas consecuencias. Nos primeiros anos da década de 1850, onde Collins situou o argumento de *The Woman in White*, a autoridade de homes como Fairlie semellaba certa. Porén, só uns anos máis tarde, cando Matthew Arnold publicou *Culture and Anarchy* en 1869, o gusto estético do público triunfara sobre o coñecemento daqueles que adicaran toda a súa vida ao estudo da beleza.

En *The Woman in White*, por tanto, Collins tratou dúas ideas ben diferentes sobre o gusto estético: unha, a elitista representada polo seu egoísta esteta Frederick Fairlie, e a outra, a popular, representada polo heroe da novela, o debuxante profesional Walter Hartight. Con matices, ese mesmo entendemento popular está representado por Mr Sherwin en *Basil* (1852), cuxa arrogante atitude de *art entendu* non pode agochar a súa completa ignorancia en cuestión artísticas. Mais esa era a mesma ignorancia contra a cal Arnold laiaba en rematando a década de 1860. A fachenda de homes como Sherwin, da que Collins tratou no seu artigo “Deep Design on Society” (1858), non estaba limitada a unha minoría durante o *mid-century*. De feito, era ben característica daqueles que Frederick Fairlie calificou como “sad Goths in Art”. Ben baseados en institucións como a de Carlisle, ben espallados nas áreas suburbanas das grandes cidades da Inglaterra victoriana, bárbaros no coñecemento da arte ficaban lonxe de seren unha excepción durante a década de 1850. A ignorancia das clases baixas que Fairlie achou intolerábel, ou o peculiar gusto mostrado por Mr Sherwin na decoración do seu lar, eran síntomas dun novo entendemento da beleza totalmente afastado de grandes conviccións de estetas como o de *The Woman in White*. É inevitábel preguntarse se Collins, reparando como reparou na degradación do gusto estético característica nos suburbios, decatouse das consecuencias da súa confianza na capacidade das clases populares para se converteren en xuíces en cuestións estéticas. Esa foi a súa proposta en “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) cando moi explicitamente dixo ser o obxectivo do seu artigo facer todo o posíbel para abalar a autoridade en cuestións artísticas, pois el vía esa mesma autoridade coutada da “popular sympathy”. Un

público intelixente con opinión de seu, segundo Collins, tiña o dereito de expresar as súas opinións como máis lle prestase, sen ser influenciado por precedentes de nengunha clase. Dito doutra maneira, a autoridade daqueles que se tiñan por mestres do gusto estético, e que fora unha característica da *boa* sociedade inglesa durante décadas, debía ser totalmente ignorada. O que Collins estaba a propoñer era unha absoluta degradación do entendemento aristocrático do gusto totalmente fóra de lugar só uns anos atrás. E a súa era unha proposta ben arriscada. Desbotando precedentes, o que ía ser utilizado como guieiro? O público intelixente de Collins ben podería ter unha multiplicidade de opinións sobre a valía dun cadro ou unha novela. Mr Sherwin e o seu particular gusto, por tanto, non ficaban sen xustificación. Iso, ou ben “popular sympathy” tiña un sentido ben particular para Collins.

A opinión expresada por Collins en “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856) era a propia dun escritor profesional cuxa produción literaria ía dirixida a un público de clase media, no momento os lectores de *Household Words*. O seu desexo, no seu artigo “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858), de aqueles interesados no teatro e cun mínimo de intelixencia axiren como una sorte de referentes para unha audiencia caracterizada pola súa ignorancia, mostra as incoherencias do posicionamento de Collins. Sempre interesado no teatro, a nula calidade do mesmo podería ser millorada se houber unha clase cun coñecemento óptimo do mesmo. Para Collins eran ben fácil pedir á “xente intelixente”, como fixo en “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), que ignorase as opinións dos críticos, connoisseurs e outros da mesma ralea cando visitaren a National Gallery. Mais a desastrosa situación do teatro inglés precisaba de medidas excepcionais. Para Collins, había públicos e *públicos*. Na Inglaterra de 1850 unha audiencia cun mínimo de educación e cultura, como a de *Household Words* onde Collins publicaba os seus ensaios e ficción, era máis unha excepción que a norma. Aínda había moito traballo por facer canto á educación dos seus coetáneos. E, na realidade, estaba a ser feito. A opinión de Collins sobre a Art Treasures Exhibition é un misterio, mais con certeza el sabía da actitude dos seus compañeiros na revista de Dickens perante o éxito da mesma. Ninguén podía ter moitas expectativas cunha audiencia popular como a que encheu o pavillón de Manchester. Ben podería ser que a sorte de falacia estética sinalada polo *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, a das fatais consecuencias do gusto estético individual, non amolase a Collins,

quizais por el mesmo nunca pensar seriamente na posibilidade de xente como Mr Sherwin teren un chisco de intelixencia. Mais aínda que así fose, os moitos Mr Sherwin a morar nos suburbios non tiñan falta de ambición para se converteren en perfeitos representantes da clase media. Collins non tiña problema en esixir á National Gallery, en “To Think, or Be Thought For?” (1856), a compra de pinturas “for us ... mere mankind” desbotando as peculiaridades do gusto estético dun feixe de connoisseurs. Ora ben, o que Collins entendía por “mere mankind” en 1856 ía mudar drasticamente nos vindeiros anos, a súa tan prezada liberdade de pensamento “on the subject of the Fine Arts” guiando as accións daqueles que como Mr Sherwin estaban a se beneficiar do desenvolvemento do sistema capitalista. Homes coma el medrarían en importancia ao longo do século dezanove, chegando mesmo a representar unha ameaza para a aristocracia do diñeiro sinalada por Collins en *Hide and Seek*—os verdadeiros patróns do movemento pre-rafaelita. Neste sentido, o personaxe de Mr Reader en “Dramatic Grub Street” (1858) anunciaba os perigos dunha democracia do gusto estético cando brincaba co dereito do seu criado para se sentar no teatro canda el. Mais a brincadeira agochaba unha auténtica ameaza. De feito, anos máis tarde, cando estaba a publicar a súa ficción nos xornais do norte da Inglaterra, Collins mesmo ía calificar aos propietarios dos mesmos como unha sorte de salvaxes dignos de se veren (“curious savages”) e sen os modos propios de homes de ben. Para el era unha indignidade se tratar con xente de semellante ralea. Mais Collins non reparou nunha obviedade: eses salvaxes estaban a se expresaren con total liberdade, sen estaren ligados a prexuizos do pasado. A ficción de Collins non era axeitada para o seu público lector, e eles naturalmente así llo dixeran. Curiosamente, un home coma el, que sospeitou as radicais mudanzas por afectaren o sistema literario inglés, ficou verdadeiramente sorprendido polas queixas dos propietarios dos xornais—as súas novelas, admiradas cando foran publicadas en *Household Words* e *All the Year Round*, agora eran criticadas. Mais Collins estaba a tratar cunha audiencia semellante co público dos *penny journals* da súa xuventude, e non cos lectores educados das revistas de Dickens. A súa tan prezada democratización do gusto estético ía bater nel dun xeito espectacular.

O esteticismo de Frederick Fairlie en *The Woman in White*, un entendemento da beleza herdado do século dezaioito, era totalmente contrario aos valores dunha sociedade de consumo tor-

nada cara ás mercadorías de produción industrial. Collins non foi alleo á democratización do gusto estético na Inglaterra de 1850. Como afirmei na Introducción, a súa escrita de xuventude reflicte como o entendemento da arte estaba a ser transformado por unha sociedade comercial pouco ou nada interesada nas opinións de aqueles que no pasado foran a única autoridade en cuestións estéticas. Homes cuxo exclusivo propósito na vida era a contemplación de obxectos preciosos non eran máis que refugалlos dun tempo onde o coñecemento artístico ficaba limitado a un falo de *connoisseurs*. Mais para Collins os tempos eran chegados. A súa prezada liberdade de pensamento estaba a mudar a sociedade inglesa e xuíces en cuestións do gusto estético como Frederick Fairlie nada podían facer. Esta era unha batalla cun claro vencedor. O presente traballo analiza o xeito en que esta tensión entre modos de apreciación estética determinados polo contexto histórico se reflicte na obra de Collins publicada na década central do século dezanove.

