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The Sensationalism of *The Woman in White*

WALTER M. KENDRICK

ONE AIM of Henry James's "The Art of Fiction" (1884) is to dispose of some misconceptions which have obscured the understanding of what novels are. Prominent among these hindrances to clarity is the "old-fashioned" distinction between the "novel of incident" and the "novel of character." No practicing novelist, according to James, can ever have paid much attention to this clumsy separation. It must have been devised by critics and readers to help them out of the "queer predicaments" into which they sometimes stumble.

It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance—to answer as little to any reality. There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character.¹

In a general sense, the distinction which James dismissed in 1884 had been a topic of literary discussion since Aristotle. The particular terms which he attacked, however, were of much more recent date. The separation of novels of incident from novels of character had been devised to deal with the queer predicament of British criticism in the 1860's, when the sudden popularity of the "sensation novel" seemed to challenge the supremacy of fictional realism.²

¹ "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine*, Sept. 1884, pp. 511-12, rpt. in *The Future of the Novel*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 15.

² In *British Novelists and Their Styles* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1859), David Masson offered a list of thirteen "rough and obvious" types of British novels since

The sensation novel had a long and various literary ancestry.³ But its major significance for mid-Victorian novel theory was the demonstration that novels could be successfully, even brilliantly written according to principles which seemed to contradict those of realism. The sensation novel, most prominently represented by the works of Wilkie Collins, defined the territory of the novel of incident; while the realistic novel, epitomized by the works of Trollope and George Eliot, established criteria for the novel of character. Using this distinction, critics were able to map the hectic field of the contemporary novel and also to find both types in the literature of the past. And, despite James's confident dismissal, these types have endured in criticism long past the decade of their discovery, outliving many of the novels which first made them visible.⁴

In whatever terms this distinction has been expressed, it has been based, as it was for mid-Victorian critics, on the notion that all novels are composed of two elements, plot and character. If a novel favors one element, it must slight the other; and the relative preponderance of plot or character in any novel will allow one to place it among either the novels of incident or the novels of character. In its crudest form, this understanding of narrative led mid-Victorian critics to a conception of the novel as a kind of vessel into which a limited amount of compositional liquid could be poured. Plot and character, like oil and water, could be combined but never fused. Subtler critics took plot and character to be only differing functions of a single narrative enterprise, but plot re-

Scott, all of them derived from the milieux with which the novels dealt (pp. 221-33). In the subsequent decade, though such labels as Military, Naval, and Traveler's Novels continued to be applied, they tended to give way before the more abstract, sometimes almost ideological distinction between "novels of incident" and "novels of character."

³ This subject is treated fully in Walter C. Phillips's *Dickens, Reade, and Collins, Sensation Novelists* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1919).

⁴ "Novels of action" and "novels of character" are the two largest categories of novels in Edwin Muir's *The Structure of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), and a similar distinction underlies the two aspects of "Plot" and "People" in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927). Wolfgang Kayser maintains the classifications of "Handlungsroman" and "Figurenroman" in *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk* (Bern: A. Francke, 1948), and Franz K. Stanzel has further elaborated them in *Typische Formen des Romans* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964). The distinction persists, though the terms are different, in Roland Barthes's "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications*, No. 8 (1966), pp. 1-27, where novels are ranged between the "strongly functional" pole of the "popular story" and the "strongly indicial" pole of the "'psychological' novel." And the distinction is still current enough for Gérard Genette to dismiss it as having no "semiological existence" in *Figures II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).

mained alien or even hostile to character, and any novel which devoted itself to one had by necessity to neglect the other.

The problem is reflected in the incommensurate figures which the mid-Victorians employed in discussing these two aspects of narrative. Plot was commonly figured as a chain or a road, while character was a drawing or a portrait. There is no way in which these two figures can be conveniently combined, and the occasional attempts to do so produced some extraordinary mixed metaphors.⁵ The matter is further complicated by a strong tendency to attribute the whole value of a novel to its painting of character portraits and to regard the linking together of plot as a merely mechanical business. Plot was a vehicle, and the worth of the novel resided in what it conveyed, not in the conveyance. Anthony Trollope, for example, was accustomed to speak of plot as "a vehicle of some sort" (*An Autobiography*, ch. 7) or a thing which could be borrowed from one's brother as one might borrow a fresh pen-nib (ch. 6). In his habitual denigration of plot, Trollope was in agreement with the generality of mid-Victorian literary critics.

The complaint most commonly brought against the sensation novelists was that, because they devoted all their attention to the construction of intricate plots, they ignored the painting of character. This deficiency was seen as not only an aesthetic but also a moral flaw. As G. H. Lewes observed of M. E. Braddon, she could never attain true eminence so long as her "grasp of character" remained inferior to her "power over plot-interest."⁶ It was generally held that Wilkie Collins, who persistently claimed a place in the "front rank" of novelists, could never make that claim good unless he learned how "to create a character which the world shall recognize as an addition to the number of living beings."⁷

The figure of character painting implies that there is a structure in the real world which preexists and governs its fictional representation. Because the novel is bound to the temporal succession of narrative, it must assemble its portraits stroke by stroke. But this sequence is of no more importance to the finished representation

⁵ For example, the reviewer of Charles H. Ross's novel *A Private Inquiry* for the *Spectator*, 15 Oct. 1870, p. 1231, conjures up the bizarre image of "mean and meanly-painted figures passing to and fro on scenes meant to be sensational enough to make you gasp."

⁶ "Criticism in Relation to Novels," *Fortnightly Review*, 15 Dec. 1865, p. 354.

⁷ Review of *No Name*, *Spectator*, 10 Jan. 1863, p. 1502.

than is the order of a painter's brush strokes to the picture he turns out. For mid-Victorian critics and realistic novelists, the value of fiction depended on its cultivation of what the real world already contained. The language of which the fictional text is made and even the fact that it is a text should efface themselves before the illusion that what it represents is real. This realistic imperative motivated the works of the great mid-Victorian realists as well as their reception by critics.⁸ It is apparent, for example, in George Eliot's declaration of good faith in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, and in Trollope's delighted approval of Hawthorne's remark that his novels are "just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case" (*An Autobiography*, ch. 8).

The major sin of the sensation novelists was their breach of this realistic faith. By focusing the reader's attention on the chains that constitute a novel's plot, they made of fiction merely a game, an activity which dictates its own rules and which stands to the real world in at best an arbitrary relation. Much of the outrage inspired in mid-Victorian critics by the sensation novel came from their perception that the value of the elements in such a novel depended primarily, like that of links in a chain, on their relation to other elements in the same novel—and not, like that of the brush strokes in a portrait, on their correspondence to something in the real world. As Alexander Smith complained of Collins's novels, "every trifling incident is charged with an oppressive importance; if a tea-cup is broken, it has a meaning, it is a link in a chain; you are certain to hear of it afterwards."⁹ The reader of a sensation novel engages in the discovery of an artificial pattern, and the enterprise need not teach him anything, even anything false, about the real world. At its best, the sensation novel aspired towards the condition of a crossword puzzle, a system of language which is governed only by its own design. As such, it was potentially subversive of the belief that fiction is and must be mimetic.

Most sensation novels were ephemeral productions, turned out and consumed in haste; and most sensation novelists were unaware

⁸ This "realistic imperative" is examined from a different perspective in my "Balzac and British Realism: Mid-Victorian Theories of the Novel," *Victorian Studies*, 20 (1976), 5-24.

⁹ "Novels and Novelists of the Day," *North British Review*, Feb. 1863, p. 184.

of the implications of the genre or unable to exploit them. But in one case, sensationalism was practiced by a self-conscious innovator who understood the terms of critical debate and took enthusiastic part in it. Throughout the 1860's, most critics gave dubious credit to Wilkie Collins for having "founded" the sensation novel, and they looked to him for the best that could be done in the genre. Collins took the responsibility of his position very seriously, endeavoring to win recognition for himself as an artist and for his novels as advances in new directions. To a large extent, however, his reputation has been determined by the brief duration of the craze he helped to initiate. He was, as the *Athenaeum* called him, "*facile princeps* . . . in a transient school,"¹⁰ and he is now generally remembered either as an adjunct to Dickens or as yet another candidate for the role of grandfather to the twentieth-century detective novel.

From the perspective of this essay, however, Collins's first great success, *The Woman in White*, can be seen as more than a historical artifact or a primitive precursor of Agatha Christie. The novel is very much concerned with the problems of plot and character, form and imitation, artifice and authenticity, which occupied the debate over literary sensationalism. It is a significant departure from the realism of Trollope and George Eliot, and it exploits its sensational techniques with remarkable ingenuity. At the same time, it is founded in the realistic faith which it violates. The novel exhibits a double urge towards conventionality and innovation, taking full advantage of its sensationalism but at the same time demanding that it be read as if it were realistic.

The Woman in White was first published in *All the Year Round*, appearing in forty weekly installments between 26 November 1859 and 25 August 1860. It was revised and a preface was added for immediate publication in three volumes. Further revisions were made, including a new preface, for a second edition in February 1861. The first set of revisions had the intention, according to the 1860 Preface, of "smoothing and consolidating" the text. Many of the later revisions, however, represent a direct response to adverse criticism of the first edition. A serious complex of errors had been uncovered by the *Times*, which reported them in its review of the

¹⁰ Review of *Poor Miss Finch*, *Athenaeum*, 17 Feb. 1872, p. 202.

novel. These Collins tried to correct, though the 1861 Preface dismisses them as "certain technical errors" and "little blemishes" which had no effect on the "interest of the narrative."¹¹

Much of the third volume of *The Woman in White* is devoted to Walter Hartright's efforts to prove that Lady Glyde did not arrive in London on 25 July, the date of her supposed death, because she did not leave Hampstead until 26 July. The one weak point in the evil intrigue of Sir Percival and Count Fosco is this discrepancy in dates, the discovery of which proves that the woman buried in Limmeridge churchyard is not Lady Glyde. As the *Times* observed, however, it is possible to establish from the sequence of dates set up in the first two volumes that Lady Glyde could not have arrived in London before 9 or 10 August, leaving a gap of more than two weeks between the conspiracy and the "truth." This truth, furthermore, as any attentive reader might assemble it, turns the hero's discovery of a one-day discrepancy into as much a fraud as the villainous plot he reveals. In its first edition, the third volume of *The Woman in White* is, as the *Times* called it, "a mockery, a delusion, and a snare."¹²

For the 1861 edition, Collins attempted to correct these errors by setting all relevant dates back sixteen days. In doing so, however, he passed over Mrs. Clements's testimony (414–19), which contains no numerical dating but which can be coordinated with the other narratives by phrases like "the next day" and "a fortnight later." This brief section of Volume III had been "true" according to Hartright's discovery, but in the second edition it puts Anne Catherick in London sixteen days too early. The second edition, therefore, and all subsequent editions based on it, continue to mock, delude, and snare their readers—although for more than a century no one seems to have been disturbed by the fact.

Errors of this kind would be, no doubt, of little importance for the reading of most novels, but they are of special interest in this case, because *The Woman in White* insists on its verifiable accuracy as a text and because Hartright applies to various fictional documents exactly the method of investigation employed by the *Times*

¹¹ This (p. xi) and all subsequent references to *The Woman in White* apply to the Everyman's Library edition, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), which prints the text of 1861.

¹² *Times* (London), 30 Oct. 1860, p. 6.

reviewer. Collins had even gone so far as to request, in the 1860 Preface, that reviewers should give away none of 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."

These little links are trifling and crucial at once. They do not guarantee the novel's correspondence to some structure outside of itself; rather, they guarantee that the novel will form a system which is consistent in all its parts. The reader will be able to validate the novel's coherence, but not by comparing it to something he has felt or seen elsewhere. Rather, he will be able to compare one part of the novel with another, using as his standard the novel's own scale of dates and durations. If the reader accepts this undertaking and if the writer constructs a system which completes its own requirements, then the contract between them is fulfilled. This is the radical contract of sensationalism, and it makes the only necessary link between the fictional world and the world of its reader.

The Woman in White is a series of documents which have been put in their present order for a specific purpose. In the brief "Preamble" which begins the novel,¹³ Hartright explains the rationale of the arrangement. The events to be narrated here should have reached public attention in a "Court of Justice"; but, since "the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse," due process has been impossible. The novel will therefore take the form of courtroom testimony: "As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now." Each narrative will represent the eyewitness experiences of one participant in the case. These narratives have been placed, by Hartright, in a sequence which answers to the two criteria of immediacy and continuity:

When the writer of these introductory lines . . . happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them.

¹³ This title was replaced after serial publication by "The Story Begun by Walter Hartright."

This method will attain the double object of presenting "the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" and of tracing "the course of one complete series of events" (1).

It is evident from the start that Hartright is writing at some time after the completion of this series of events and that his understanding of the whole series has brought him to arrange the narratives in this order. Hartright's privilege is shared by no other narrator. All of them have written their testimony at a time which falls within the limits of the series as Hartright defines it, and none of them has the advantage of knowing what events will follow those which he himself describes. As the editor of the collection of documents called *The Woman in White*, Hartright sees the story whole, from the beginning, and he has arranged its components so that they form at once a temporal and a causal continuity. He figures the course of the novel as a "dark road" (373) which advances "to an appointed and an inevitable end" (253), and as a "chain" which "reaches fairly from the outset of the story to the close" (564).

The criteria of immediacy and continuity are, as Hartright establishes them, apparently complementary. In its two stages of revision, the novel was made to look more and more like a continuous whole. In the serial, each section was labeled only with the name of its narrator, but in the first book-edition these titles were changed so that we read from "The Story Begun by Walter Hartright" through "The Story Continued" by the other narrators, to "The Story Concluded" by Hartright again. In both the serial and the 1860 edition, the novel was divided into two unequal parts, but in 1861 this division was replaced by three "Epochs," each corresponding to one volume. In its final form, the novel attempts not only to smooth over the discontinuous appearance of a story told by several narrators but to minimize even the interruptions made by putting down one volume and picking up another.

Hartright's "Preamble" maintains that events, narration, and the reading of the novel make a single sequence. Changes in the name of the narrator should not affect this triple unity. In practice, however, the chain of narrators does not correspond to the chain of events: nothing in the events requires that their progress should be told by the sequence of voices which Hartright has chosen. These voices make their own sequence, superimposed upon and not always in close touch with the sequence of events. Reading *The*

Woman in White is an experience quite unlike living it, though Hartright's rhetoric of continuity insists throughout that the two experiences are one. The sequence of narrators provides no step-by-step development of events, but rather a series of sudden revelations. Each time a narrator belatedly uncovers some fragment of the truth, there is an abrupt adjustment of his and the reader's vision. These adjustments produce what for mid-Victorian critics was the real aim of a novel like this one—a series of “sensations.”

Margaret Oliphant's 1862 review of *The Woman in White*, which prophetically names it the founder of a new “school” in fiction, picks out two “sensation scenes” for special notice. The first occurs early in Hartright's initial narrative; it is, in Mrs. Oliphant's estimation, “a sensation scene of the most delicate and skilful kind.”¹⁴

I . . . was strolling along the lonely high-road—idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like—when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me. (14)

This touch marks Hartright's first encounter with the woman in white. The high-road becomes the “road” which the novel travels, and this encounter becomes the “cause” of others which follow it. The chain of sensational revelations leads back eventually to Anne Catherick's illegitimate conception in August 1826; and it is only when the reader has learned this fact, which is revealed some five hundred pages later, that he knows the full sequence of causes which brought the woman in white to the high-road after midnight. This chain of sensations, which leads the reader on an anti-Shandean course *ad ovum*, adds a third chain to those of narrators and of events. And again, in spite of the “Preamble,” this chain is far from coincident with the other two.

All the questions which this scene raises in Hartright's mind—how has this woman come here? why does she wear white? who is the Baronet she fears and why does she fear him?—obtain answers at some point in the novel, but only the revelations come in chronological sequence. The immediate cause of her presence is her es-

¹⁴ “Sensation Novels,” *Blackwood's*, May 1862, p. 565.

cape from the Asylum that same evening (21); she wears white because of Mrs. Fairlie's kindness to her in 1837 (48–49); she fears Sir Percival Glyde (90) because he had her committed a short time before her appearance on the high-road (119); and he had her committed because she claims to know his Secret, which she learned about the time she took to wearing white (485). The order of these answers is less like a road or a chain than a "mosaic of evidence," as the sharp-eyed *Times* reviewer called the novel, to which pieces may be added at any time, in any sequence. The woman in white herself is a bundle of potential sensations, who exists in the novel only in order to provide them one at a time.

Mrs. Oliphant's second great "sensation scene" also occurs early in the novel, at the end of the third serial installment. At Hartright's first meeting with Laura Fairlie, he had observed "something wanting" in her (41). With this odd idea still on his mind, he sits down to hear Marian read from Mrs. Fairlie's letters the explanation of how Anne Catherick came to Limmeridge and how she began to wear white. Meanwhile, tying a "white handkerchief" about her head, Laura goes out to walk on the terrace in the "soft, mysterious rays" of the moon (46). As Marian reads about the "walking mystery" of Mrs. Catherick (47), Hartright watches Laura's figure, "bright and soft in its snowy muslin dress—her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under her chin" (48). As Marian asks him how old the woman on the high-road was (Laura's age) and how she was dressed ("all in white"), Hartright begins to notice something. But it takes Mrs. Fairlie's comments on the resemblance between Laura and Anne to bring the truth upon him:

I started up from the ottoman before Miss Halcombe could pronounce the next words. A thrill of the same feeling which ran through me when the touch was laid upon my shoulder on the lonely high-road chilled me again.

There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white! (50)

All doubt now turns to conviction, the "something wanting" in Laura is now explained—and the effect, as Mrs. Oliphant remarks,

is "pure sensation, neither more nor less" ("Sensation Novels," p. 572).

The resemblance between Laura and Anne Catherick is the pivotal device of *The Woman in White*. Fosco's evil plot consists merely in the extension of what Hartright himself has introduced to the reader: the similar appearance of the two women. Through an illegitimate synecdoche, Fosco makes whiteness stand for all there is of both; from this he moves to the fatal metaphor by which Anne is made to take Laura's place in her grave. The principal crime in *The Woman in White* is the perpetration of this false metaphor. Indeed, as Mrs. Oliphant observes, Fosco is likely to strike most readers as "rather an ill-used personage than otherwise," hardly the "impersonation of evil" that Hartright and Marian take him to be ("Sensation Novels," p. 567). But in the morality of *The Woman in White*, false rhetoric is the worst of crimes, and Fosco is guilty on several counts of criminal figuration. Yet he is apparently no more guilty than Hartright himself, whose tricks ought equally to be condemned by the novel which displays them. There is, however, one great difference: in order to provide sensations in plenty, Hartright must do what his archenemy does; but Hartright's victim is only the reader, and the crime is only the reader's desire to be duped.

Before Fosco decides to exchange her for Laura, Anne has been making sensational appearances in the neighborhood of Blackwater Park, dropping hints that she knows some dire "Secret" about Sir Percival. These appearances alternate in the novel with a clumsy conspiracy to make Laura turn over her property to her husband by signing documents which have been folded to hide all but the signature space. By sheer frequency of juxtaposition, it comes to seem that the mystery of Anne's "Secret" must be related in some way to this intrigue over twenty thousand pounds. Until nearly the end of the novel, Hartright's investigations of Anne's past are carried on as if they will lead to a discovery about the crucial discrepancy in dates. Eventually he does find a cause for the resemblance between the two women: Anne is Laura's illegitimate half-sister (502). He discovers as well the nature of the Secret: Sir Percival is illegitimate, too (461). But his most striking discovery is that Anne, for all her hinting, knew only that there was a Secret, not what it amounted to. Her hints were only the repetition, "like a

parrot," of angry words her mother had once used in her presence (487). With this revelation, the apparent connection between Anne's history and Laura's fortune is shown at last to be illusory. In just Fosco's manner, the novel has taken two complexes of features, some of which correspond, and implied that they all do—proving finally that the correspondence is no greater than it first appeared to be. A grand rhetorical quibble is carried on for five hundred pages, and the result is that the only traits which the women have truly in common are those accidents of dress, attitude, and complexion that Hartright noticed in the second sensation scene.

Both Hartright and his opponents deal throughout the novel in texts and documents of many kinds, continually examining, comparing, and emending them. Just as the villains are rhetorical criminals, whose principal crime is the distortion of the written word, so Hartright is a rhetorical hero, who engages in a long campaign of textual reconstruction, the final achievement of which is the novel itself. Some of the villains' tricks are crude and obvious—trying to make Laura sign a concealed document or substituting a blank sheet for Marian's letter to Mr. Kyrle (312). Others are more ingenious, or at least more sensational. When Marian collapses in fever after a strenuous session with her diary, her writing trails off. The next page, however, contains a "Postscript by a Sincere Friend," a statement by Fosco, who has doubly violated this text by reading it and then by writing upon it himself (302–4). When Laura arrives at the Asylum, dazed and drugged, she is dressed in Anne's clothes, and her feeble efforts to convince the matron that there has been an error are met by the latter's bland exclamation, on reading her labeled linen: "Anne Catherick, as plain as print!" (385).

The most evil false text in the novel is the inscription on the Fairlie tombstone, which declares in letters of stone that Laura is buried there and that she died on 25 July. The "Narrative of the Tombstone" is the only explicitly mendacious case among the "several narratives" which conclude Volume II, and it is the culmination of Hartright's campaign when, with the whole village of Limmeridge gathered round to watch, the lying words are chipped away (563). Fosco, too, is done away with by reinscription. Seeing him for the last time, in the Paris morgue, Hartright observes that

the brand on his upper arm, which had marked him as a member of the Italian "Brotherhood," has been obliterated by "two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T." He learns later that the T stands for "Traditore," and with this accurate label the Count descends to the grave (567).

Sir Percival's Secret is also a textual one. Led by various evidence to the vestry of Old Welmingham Church, Hartright examines the parish register book for the entry on the marriage of Sir Percival's parents. There is nothing remarkable about the entry except "the narrowness of the space into which it was compressed at the bottom of the page" (453). But, since there is a duplicate register at Knowlesbury, he resolves to examine it as well. The result is sensational.

My heart gave a great bound, and throbbed as if it would stifle me. I looked again—I was afraid to believe the evidence of my own eyes. No! not a doubt. The marriage was not there. . . . The last entry on one page recorded the marriage of the man with my Christian name. Below it there was a blank space. . . . That space told the whole story! (460)

Sir Percival, too late to prevent this discovery, sets fire to the church vestry and is trapped in the burning building. When Hartright and the townspeople break down the door, they can see no trace of the villain. They see "nothing but a sheet of living fire" (469).

Sir Percival begins as a blank space and ends as a blank sheet of flame. His life has been a forged document, and justice erases him. In a similar way, the white figure of Anne Catherick, so portentous in the first sensation scene, dwindles in significance with each new discovery about her—until, when all is known, she vanishes, as blankly insignificant as her own white clothing.

So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages, as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable gloom. Like a shadow she first came to me in the loneliness of the night. Like a shadow she passes away in the loneliness of the dead. (504)

Sir Percival owes his power and position to a few lines of writing where there ought to be a space; Anne Catherick is a blank, written over in life by her own delusion and in death by another woman's name. Laura herself, though she is supposed to be the

novel's heroine, exists primarily as a name written on a folded parchment and inscribed on a white tombstone, both of which spaces ought to remain blank. As the champion of textual integrity, Hartright has the duty of erasing that name, and in the end he completes his mission by marrying Laura and changing her name permanently.

Villainy and heroism alike in *The Woman in White* operate on the assumption that there is such a thing as a transparent text, an ordered arrangement of words and spaces which can be taken as proof of events in the real world and even as a substitute for them. The corrupt texts of Glyde and Fosco are discredited only by other texts gathered by Hartright. In the dense rhetorical atmosphere of the novel, characters exist as collections of signatures, register entries, letters, and laundry marks. Empty spaces tell stories, and a tombstone makes a narrative. There is no way of knowing which of these texts is transparent and which corrupt except by comparison with other texts which are taken on trust to be honest. If these texts fail, then others still must be found to support them. But the endless chain of text on text cannot get beyond the fact that a true word is indistinguishable from a forged one, that all blanks are equally white. The textual chain cannot verify itself; it must be broken at some point and attached to a trust not derived from words.

For Hartright, this trust is established at the end of the second Epoch when, although chronology continues to march forward, the novel doubles back on itself. Hartright's campaign of textual renovation is set moving by an experience which cancels the similitude set up in the second sensation scene three hundred pages before. Returning to England after several months in Central America, Hartright visits Laura's tomb in Limmeridge churchyard. As he stands by the grave, a veiled woman approaches.

She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters. . . .

The woman lifted her veil.

"Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde——"

Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave. (370)

All of Hartright's subsequent investigations of diaries, letters, and register books are anchored in this striking moment when language is negated by the sight of a living face. From this point onward, Hartright will devote himself to the correction of texts, but his entire campaign depends upon an immediate vision which transcends the lies of language—just the sort of direct felt sympathy which was the ultimate goal of mid-Victorian realism. Hartright breaks the textual chain by believing that Laura's face cannot lie. The reader of *The Woman in White* has already broken it by believing, as the novel urges him to do, that a man named Hartright has a heart which is right and writes from his heart. For Hartright, this trust leads to love and eventual happiness; for the reader, it leads to a series of sensational deceptions.

Despite the continuous chronology which makes Volume III look like a sequel to Volumes I and II, most of the third volume is a retelling of earlier matter either in word-for-word transcription by Hartright or in his paraphrase of other narrators. The period from 20 to 26 July, which has already been treated by Mrs. Michelson, Hester Pinhorn, Jane Gould, Dr. Goodricke, and the tombstone, is renarrated by Marian, Laura, Mrs. Clements, and Count Fosco, along with earlier and subsequent information which sets the crucial period in a motivated context. Each of these renarrators fills in some omissions in earlier testimony and leaves gaps for later narrators to fill. The story is not made complete until a letter from Sir Percival and a cabman's order, both dated 26 July, are obtained. Joining these to his other texts, Hartright is at last able to announce, "I now had in my possession all the papers that I wanted" (559). These papers, brought before the skeptical lawyer, constitute "the plainest evidence he had ever heard in his life" (562). Compiled as a "plain narrative of the conspiracy," they convince the Limmeridge townspeople of Laura's identity (560). Fleshed out by Hartright's narrative and the later addition of other evidence, they make *The Woman in White*. But by this time, with Laura recognized again, her home restored, and all villainy disposed of, the pugnacious "Preamble" has lost its motivation. The reason for the novel's existence, which it provides with great care on page one, has been used up by its end. In retrospect, it looks as if there never was any reason for the novel to exist at all.

Everything, indeed, which the "Preamble" guarantees evaporates

during the course of the novel. The technique of first-person testimony, which the "Preamble" claims will make the events clear and positive, is the principal means by which they become blurred and ambiguous. The complex doings at Blackwater Park between 20 June and 26 July involve the simultaneous activity of several characters in different places. The apparent fullness of the early narratives conceals tricks with space behind a pretense of fidelity to time. Only when Count Fosco's confession reveals where he was during the many gaps in Marian's vision of him does spatial continuity match its temporal counterpart. In the last pages of the novel, when the same time period has been narrated eight times, the reader is at last able to construct a full narrative from the omniscient perspective which Hartright has enjoyed since the beginning—including not only how time passed during that busy month but also where each character passed it. Only at the end of the novel does its complex mosaic of corrupted words, violated spaces, broken time, and splintered space make the coherent whole which the "Preamble" promised.

According to the "Preamble," the three sequences of narrators, events, and reading are really one—a linear movement from moment to moment, incident to incident, and page to page. In practice, however, the novel derives its sensations from the multiple discrepancies among these three sequences. The reader's encounter with the events is limited by the very thing which is supposed to make it complete—confinement to the experience of one or another character. In this, *The Woman in White* reverses the values which mid-Victorian criticism assigned to the two components of narrative. The events which Hartright sets out to describe make a complete structure before he begins. As the narrators tell their several tales, this structure is constituted bit by bit—or, in the language of mid-Victorian criticism, stroke by stroke. Only when all aspects of this structure have been described and placed in an order which is not that of the novel's own temporality, has the reader acquired a full "portrait" of the events.

In contrast to the complex spatiality of its plot, the characters of *The Woman in White* are bound to the sequence in which they make their narratives. They are the links in the narrative chain, reduced to the vehicular function which mid-Victorian criticism ascribed solely to "plot." "Character" in *The Woman in White*

has none of the pseudospacial coherence which critics sought in it—only the events have that—and its plot is not merely a means of getting from one page to the next—it is the unified structure which the novel's language imitates. The first great "novel of incident" does fall victim, despite its author's disclaimers, to the subordination of character to plot which critics of the 1860's took to be the hallmark of sensationalism. It does so, however, not because it contains less of one element than the other, but because the narrative function of what ought to be a higher interest has been assumed by what should have been a lower.

One consequence of this reversal is the novel's demonstration that the exploitation of textuality runs counter to the achievement of mimesis. *The Woman in White* derives its sensations from tricks with its own nature as a text, but if all the world's writing were like *The Woman in White*, the truth which the novel pretends to seek would be available nowhere. In order for the novel to provide its sensations, there must somewhere be texts which are trusted to be transparent. This is the faith of mid-Victorian realism, and *The Woman in White* is as firmly grounded in it as any novel by Trollope or George Eliot. Yet, at the same time, *The Woman in White* violates the realist's faith at every turn.

This contradiction is reflected in the novel's structure as a sort of second-degree text, an arrangement of realistic writing which becomes sensational by means of the pattern which its editor has given to it. There is an odd alliance between the hero of the novel and its villain: Hartright's arrangement of narratives contains as many misleading analogies and false metaphors as Fosco's conspiracy; but Fosco imposes a deceitful pattern on people and things, while Hartright restricts himself to fictional reports of them.¹⁵ Hartright's deceptions are forgivable, indeed they are necessary, in the world governed by the sensational contract between the writer and the reader of *The Woman in White*; but these same deceptions are crimes in the world which the novel portrays. According to its own morality, *The Woman in White* places itself one step further from the real world than the realistic novel claims

¹⁵ In *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Twayne, 1970), William Marshall points out that Hartright and Fosco agree on the principle that "knowledge leads to power" (p. 60). The withholding of knowledge, however, is for both the primary exercise of power. Fosco is "evil" because he withholds knowledge from other characters, while Hartright is "good" because he withholds it only from the reader.

to do. The morality of reading *The Woman in White* is very different from that of living in its world: reading is a separate territory, and Fosco's evil is its good.

By comparison with later sensation and detective novels, or even with the sophisticated earlier sensationalism of *Tristram Shandy*, *The Woman in White* appears as an intermediate work, a landmark of ambivalence. Perhaps also, because it cannot support its claim to be a direct vision of the real world, it and its author can never attain a place in the "front rank," such as Collins desired for both of them. The novel does, however, suggest some provocative implications of the mid-Victorian vocabulary of chains and portraits, a vocabulary which has continued to be used throughout the past century. The "chain" of *The Woman in White* is its own nature as language, a language which is not life; while the "portrait," which the faith of realism made preeminent, is a matter of agreement between writer and reader, a contract which states that language shall efface itself before what it portrays. At the heart of *The Woman in White* stands the momentous question whether the chain might not precede the portrait, whether the language of any text might not generate the reality which it pretends to imitate. The ambivalent rhetoric of *The Woman in White* marks a tentative breach of the mid-Victorian realist contract; and this, far more than its role as precursor of the twentieth-century detective novel, makes *The Woman in White* a significant document in the history of English fiction.

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