

**DETECTIVE NARRATIVE  
AND THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINS IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ENGLAND**

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Working with Fredric Jameson's understanding of genre as a "formal sedimentation" of an ideology, this study investigates the historicity of the detective narrative, what role it plays in bourgeois, capitalist culture, what ways it mediates historical processes, and what knowledge of these processes it preserves. I begin with the problem of the detective narrative's origins. This is a complex and ultimately insoluble problem linked to the limits of historical perspective and compounded by the tendency of genres to erase their own origins. I argue that any critical reading of the detective story beginning with the notion that real crime and working class unrest are the specters that the detective story seeks to exorcise misapprehends the real class struggle that is evidenced in, but also disguised by, the detective story: the struggle between the ascendant (though never assuredly so) bourgeoisie and the receding (though, again, never assuredly so) aristocratic and post-feudal ruling classes. Instead, I argue that it is this class struggle that is apparent in the detective narrative's special structure—the double structure by which it can pose any-origin-whatever as a moment of history and construct that history forward while appearing to uncover it backward. The detective narrative erases precisely the problem of the bourgeoisie's lack of origins (from a feudal perspective) and counterfeits history. For this reason, I locate the detective narrative's beginnings in specific sites where the transfer of power from traditional institutions to bourgeois institutions or institutions reformed by the bourgeoisie, including the Chancery court (in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*), the construction of the New Poor Laws of 1834 (in Wilkie Collins' *The Dead Secret*), and marriage and inheritance in *Bleak House* and Collins' *The Moonstone*. Ending with a study of the commonly acknowledged first detective novel, *The Moonstone*, I conclude that this novel and the generic paradigm of the detective narrative it exemplifies succeed in encrypting the historical discontinuity between post-feudal modes of production and capitalism and that, ultimately, crime is just an alibi for the work of historical reconstruction that the detective narrative carries out.

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## 1.0 THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINS

*Origin, though an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history.*

-- Walter Benjamin,

The Origin of German Tragic Drama<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 GENRE AND THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINS

There is no simple way to begin an investigation into the detective narrative's place in bourgeois consciousness and the bourgeois cultural imagination. The goal of this study is to discover the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 45-46.

ideological nature of the detective narrative, what role it plays in bourgeois or capitalist culture, what ways it mediates real historical processes, and what knowledge of these processes it preserves. However, the very nature of the project immediately throws up a problem: the problem of origins. Fredric Jameson's work with genre as a category of (literary) history illuminates this problem. In *The Political Unconscious*<sup>2</sup>, Jameson addresses genre's tendency to erase its own historical specificity, or its particular roots in a historical moment, and the way it thereby becomes the source of misconceptions of history itself. Particularly, he is concerned with genre's use as a diachronic category in a system which tends to negate "the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past,"<sup>3</sup> such as he identifies in the work of Northrop Frye. Jameson writes:

the driving force of Frye's system is the idea of historical *identity*: his identification of mythic patterns in modern texts aims at reinforcing our sense of the affinity between the cultural present of capitalism and the distant mythical past of tribal societies, and at awakening a sense of the continuity between our psychic life and that of primitive peoples.<sup>4</sup>

In this instance, genre is working as a "'positive' hermeneutic," which means it "filter[s] out historical difference and the radical discontinuity of modes of production and of their cultural expressions."<sup>5</sup> As a result, genre becomes a way of negating the material reality of history; whereas, for Jameson, the work of the historian, which is to say, the work of the Marxist historian, must be to "respec[t] the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130; original emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day.”<sup>6</sup>

The challenge is to study genre in a way commensurate with the conception of history as “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.”<sup>7</sup> With this, Jameson is harking back to one of Marx’s most deliberate statements about the nature of human history. “The realm of freedom,” Marx writes:

really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1981), pp. 958-959; also quoted in Jameson: p. 19, n. 3.

This is the basis for Jameson's insistence that it is by attending to difference and discontinuity that we can grasp the processes of history. While there is a universal struggle, there is no universal interpretation to apply to the "vital episodes in [this] single vast unfinished plot."<sup>9</sup> The struggle of history is one struggle, but the processes of history have been "repressed and buried," submerged in/by the "political unconscious,"<sup>10</sup> and each moment must be treated as a "mystery"<sup>11</sup> because there is solidarity but not sameness. The work of the historian, then, is to "detec[t] the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [and] restor[e] to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history,"<sup>12</sup> to treat different moments of the past as mysteries whose codes we have not yet deciphered.

When it comes to tracing specific and unique historical processes, for Jameson, genre is nevertheless an important and useful concept and tool for the investigation of history despite its deployment in universalizing historiography. For Jameson, genre has a material reality and is therefore expressive of historical processes in however repressed and buried a way. He asserts: "in its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message."<sup>13</sup> Genre, in other words, is the "formal *sedimentation*"<sup>14</sup> of an ideology, and thus the particular historical moment out of which a genre emerges is crystallized in it. For Jameson, this makes genre a useful critical tool for gaining access to the "political unconscious" of an individual text—in so far as the conventions of a particular genre are caught up in historical processes and are deposited in later texts, they mark the ideological negotiations of that text and function as clues to buried historical knowledge. Jameson writes: "when such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite

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<sup>9</sup> Jameson, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form.”<sup>15</sup> And so, “the ideology of the form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure as a generic message which coexists—either as a contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism—with elements from later stages.”<sup>16</sup>

This is a thesis which resonates with Marx’s own analysis of cultural production, which is to say Marx’s analysis of the production of the culture of post-revolutionary France. In *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,<sup>17</sup> Marx writes:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

What Marx is introducing here is the idea that the forms in which a culture at any given moment of change or crisis expresses itself are not necessarily transparent expressions of that culture. Revolutionary moments can be dragged down by the impulse to repeat an older legitimating moment in culture just as counter-revolutionary moments can be elevated in public imagination through the theft of older, authentic costumes and slogans. And what Marx demonstrates through his own reading of history is that the historian must be attuned to the incommensurability of certain, for all intents and purposes, “generic messages” and the historical moments in which they (re-)appear. Marx’s analysis of cultural ‘costumes’ is also the kind of analysis Jameson proposes with the literary guises in which ideology appears. The work is to recognize in the appearance of certain generic characteristics moments of reappropriation of costumes still inhabited by the ghosts of past forms of culture and to analyze these as evidence of discontinuity, to treat such moments as instances of borrowing or stealing from the past and therefore as clues to discontinuity rather than as evidence of an essential continuity.

For this work, Jameson proposes using genre as part of a “negative hermeneutic.” Given the premise that through the re-appropriations of genres some aspects or attributes of those genres are left behind, this negative hermeneutic would be useful in judging the significance of what is lost. It is a matter of the use of a conception of genre in its “strong form” as a critical tool that helps us chart its movement through history away from its origins and, in turn, illuminate the negotiations of an individual text by illuminating precisely where it fails to incorporate the whole of a genre. It is by noting the “the coexistence or tension between several generic modes or strands”<sup>19</sup> in a single text that sheds light on what are therefore “signifying

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<sup>19</sup> Jameson, p. 141.

*absence[s]* in the [individual] text.”<sup>20</sup> These absences are clues to the ideological demands that determine which elements survive and which are not serviceable and therefore give access to a hidden reality that history has forgotten.

If one is to analyze with any rigor the cultural and historical codes that perform as a genre’s conventions, the discovery of the origins of a genre is therefore indispensable. However, how we understand origins, and consequently what we establish as the proper means of their discovery, is, again, a problem to be reckoned. Although locating a genre at its historically specific moment is crucial, it is also the case that the notion of the origin of a genre could ratify historical misconceptions. This is potentially true of Jameson’s fundamental concept: “the emergent, strong form of a genre.” This is evident in the way that, for Jameson, a genre can only degenerate. “Genres,” Jameson writes, “are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on to place this generic contract historically, mapping it onto an evolutionary (or more specifically devolutionary) version of communication, pointing out that “the speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deictics and pragmatics) which ensure their appropriate reception”; meanwhile, genres belong to “the mediated situations of a more complicated social life,” where “perceptual signals must be replaced by conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses” or meanings.<sup>22</sup> But by the time that we get to late capitalism, according to Jameson, this contract itself becomes a thing of the past.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 137; original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 106; original emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

With the elimination of an institutionalized social status for the cultural producer and the opening of the work of art itself to commodification, the older generic specifications are transformed into a brand-name system against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle. The older generic categories do not, for all that, die out, but persist in the half-life of the subliterate genres of mass culture, transformed into the drugstore and airport paperback lines of gothics, mysteries, romances [...]<sup>23</sup>

Thus, genre is imagined somewhere between a purer moment of direct communication and the entropy of consumer capitalism's cultural commodities.

Supporting this account is a strong notion of a genre's origins, and it underwrites an otherwise tenuous distinction between use and misuse or authenticity and inauthenticity. The distinction between the heyday of generic forms and their broken, decaying, twilight existence as late-capitalist commodities is articulated as the difference between the "proper use" designated by the very contract that genre names and the consumption of texts that falsely exist under the sign of an authentic genre. This implies that there is a qualitative difference between the abstraction that is the generic construct in relationship to an individual work and the abstraction-cum-bastardization that is the packaging of cultural production for the consumer, a qualitative difference that rests on the assumption of an era of free and organic expression as well as the assumption that such categories arising out of that era are what is preserved in today's institutions of literature. This works, though, only because "the emergent, strong form" of a genre remains a given that never has to be brought to light—a treatment that contributes to the mystification of genre despite all efforts to the contrary.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

The problem is that the “emergent, strong form of a genre” gets confused with its identification as such. The notion of an “emergent, strong form of a genre” posits that a set of recognizable form-content arrangements emerges in the work of multiple cultural producers independently of one another, relatively speaking, and that these are sedimentations or precipitations of structures of feeling. This is the moment of the emergence of a form or the formalization of emergent energies and ideas. What emerges in recognizable form is what we mean to name and delineate by the generic designation; it is what the generic designation tells us we are “identifying.” However, we should not assume that what emerges has its description branded on its forehead. And so, the act of identifying a genre must be understood to be potentially catachrestic lest genre become the means by which historical misconceptions are permanently instituted.

Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious bears this out. The work of the unconscious is two-fold; it acts as a repository for knowledge that the subject or the culture cannot deal with in its raw form; and the unconscious also rearranges this knowledge in a form that hides its truth. The word encrypting is a useful one for indicating the two-fold work of the unconscious. The unconscious entombs knowledge and seals the crypt with an encoded message. For Jameson, as for Freud, the key to “repressed and buried reality” lies in imaginative production, the venue for the interplay of the unconscious’s encoded messages, though these messages are no longer the production of an individual and personal psyche but are now the collective work of a whole culture’s repression. The work of the historian in this case is to decode these messages and thereby find the secret key that releases buried reality from its tomb.

Where we position the concept of genre in this schema is crucial. Genre in the form it appears to us is not simply a single encryption. It is actually a double encryption. The moment

when the strong form of a genre emerges, if that is the way to put it, or the moment of the solidification of energies and ideas into a shared form, is one collective moment of repression and encoding of historical processes; it is just like a dream or a work of literature, only one can add that those collectively realized affinities and similarities have even more to tell about the historical processes they collectively encrypt than an individual author's dream. But genre, the preserve of the formal *identification* of certain shared formal conventions, must be understood as a double encryption, an already processed encounter with *already processed encounters* with historical processes. It follows that the so-called identification of the forms taken by emergent energies may misname or misidentify or miscalculate those forms. And since categories of all kinds are constituted by difference, these reifications could potentially alienate, through their taxonomy, formal practices that were, in their emergence, part of the same energy and cultural dream. So, in order to gain access to what is encrypted both in a particular form and in its generic identification, the relationship between a text that bears the form that is considered to be paradigmatic for a genre and that genre must then be treated as a mystery.

To do this requires the kind of dialectical historical perspective Walter Benjamin is offering in his discussion of the nature of origins, a discussion itself born out of Benjamin's own contemplation of generic concepts. By writing that "the term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance," Benjamin is implicitly refuting positivist historicist conceptions of history. In Benjamin's contemplation of it, the origin is not at all an origin in the sense that we generally understand that word. Not a beginning, the origin appears here as something more akin to matter in quantum theory: the appearance of temporal processes in the guise of solidity, shape, and finitude. But Benjamin's metaphor of "an eddy in the stream



of becoming” is more meaningful in so far as it captures the idea of a phenomenon that has a real existence but is nonetheless only constituted by movement and change, by “becoming and disappearance.” It is not something before which there was nothing in its place and not something with solid and distinct proportions that stands out against the void.

One of the important aspects of this re-conceptualization of the notion of origin is the way it enables a deconstruction of a positivist orientation toward the past in the form of the idea of an historical first. The historicist orientation toward the past is literally a backward orientation in which each and every historiographical account constitutes and adds to the security of the sense of the present as the culmination of all of history. Such a perspective achieves this by rehearsing the linear narrative according to which the present inherits the earth. A significant contribution to this orientation is the unreconstructed notion of origins. A historicist’s conception of historical analysis is to begin from the present and look back over time as over a road that has always been leading straight to his particular historical position and account for the way things became as they are. Part of that survey of successive moments of the past is to identify the first instance of something the historicist already understands as intact and finite. He looks off into the distance for the farthest off recognizable instance of the thing he has with him in his world, so to speak; what he finds will be its first instance—the first because farthest distant in time. However, what is actually being identified is not the beginning of a particular something’s existence but the limit of the contemporary historical consciousness, the moment in the past when the present is no longer able to recognize itself.

In Benjamin’s formulation, what is identified on the edge of the present’s historical consciousness *is* the origin of that aspect of the present which sparked the investigation; but its real identity is more than we can recognize from our present perspective. An origin, like a genre

in Jameson's theory, is the encrypted form in which historical processes are buried. Therefore, deciphering the historical and ideological meaning of the detective narrative requires estranging it from its acknowledged firsts. Because the identification of a genre is already a political, ideological, and historiographical act that, at least potentially, covers over or renders enigmatic the political, ideological, and historical meaning of the impulses and practices it purports to identify, the genre, which is always constituted by a set of assumptions about its ethos, must be examined dialectically in juxtaposition to the texts that are defined, enhanced, and reduced by their relationship to it.

One of the most important, anti-positivist contributions of Benjamin's statement about origins is its appreciation of the fact that there is no way to begin at the beginning. Instead, the beginning of a historical investigation is the present. For Benjamin, the beginning of a historical materialist consciousness is the instantaneous impression made by a particular moment of the past on the mind of the present. He writes: "historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger."<sup>24</sup> Or, in a variation, he writes: "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."<sup>25</sup> For a fuller sense of what this means, we must draw on two sources, Benjamin's discussion of "shock" in "A Berlin Chronicle" and his discussion of the power of the camera in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

In “A Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin is thinking of the way the brain can record something, in this case aurally, without one’s being conscious of the thing being committed to memory and of the shock with which the “memory” returns at an unbidden moment. He writes:

One evening—I was already in bed—my father appeared, probably to say good night. It was half against his will, I thought, that he told me the news of a relative’s death. The deceased was a cousin, a grown man who scarcely concerned me. But my father gave the news with details, took the opportunity to explain, to answer my question, what a heart attack was, and was communicative. I did not take in much of the explanation. But that evening I must have memorized my room and my bed, as one observes exactly every place where one feels dimly that one will later have to search for something one has forgotten there. Many years afterward I discovered what I had “forgotten,” a part of the news that my father had broken to me in that room: that the illness was called syphilis.<sup>26</sup>

The detail about the syphilis strikes him for the first time much later, presumably when he can understand it, because it had never been part of his active processes of remembering, never been part of his deliberate reminiscences. Nevertheless, it has remained on record, as it were, to appear at a moment when it can have meaning.

This process whereby things long unnoticed, buried, or practically invisible make themselves known is one Benjamin also sees as the work of the moving image. The camera has the power to reveal those things that habituation’s negligence had rendered invisible: “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978, pp. 59-60.

commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film [...] extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives [...]”<sup>27</sup> He goes on:

Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the camera and the moving image make these hidden actions and realities visible “with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, the work of the historical materialist is analogous to the work of the camera; she must interrupt the practiced stories of linear history that continually re-enter the moments that could “burst this prison-world asunder.”<sup>30</sup>

In a way, the study of genre is already ripe for this kind of perspective because many applications of generic categories are ahistorical. Genre is usually treated as a kind of Platonic ideal, something that is not material and not exhausted by any particular instance of it. Borrowing Gilles Deleuze’s insight relating to the difference between generality and repetition—“it is not Federation Day which commemorates the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days”<sup>31</sup>—we glimpse the relationship between genre and the texts that are understood to be its originals. The original comes to be judged as a reiteration (in advance) of the law of genre. Once this reversal takes place, the so-called essence of genre supplants the material of its genesis and is then removed from historicity.

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 236.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 1.

Any innovations, transformations, or counterfeiting of the original form can be tolerated as long as they do not seem to violate what a given era has decided is the essence of the genre. The historicity of any given definition of the genre is not accounted for, nor is the historicity of any innovation, transformation, or counterfeit accounted for (with the one exception that older instances of “the genre” can be sometimes demoted and indulged as primitive versions containing the essence if not the fully developed form toward which the genre’s history is progressing). Instead, the (re)definition of genre ratifies the present’s historical perspective.

A few more or less well-known instances should suffice to demonstrate what this looks like. First there is T. S. Eliot’s famous claim that Wilkie Collins’ “*The Moonstone* is the first and greatest of English detective novels.”<sup>32</sup>

We say *English* detective novels, because there is also the work of Poe, which has a *pure* detective interest. The detective story, as created by Poe, is something as specialized and as intellectual as a chess problem; whereas the best English detective fiction has relied less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on the intangible human element.<sup>33</sup>

What Eliot is essentially doing here is rewriting the definition of the genre according to what he discovers to be the signature of *The Moonstone*. Though he is acknowledging some kind of relationship between Poe as an author who is credited with the first detective stories and Collins’ novel, he is also drawing a line between them, deeming them two different genres. One might ask why call *The Moonstone* a detective novel at all, and Eliot’s rhetoric is instructive: his position rests on the idea that there is a genre, the (English) detective novel, that is something

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<sup>32</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Wilkie Collins and Dickens,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 413.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

other than the form of the texts that have given birth to the genre and that this authorizes him to find a text that exemplifies it. So while he may be claiming that *The Moonstone* is the first, it is an abstract, idealized notion of the genre that precedes this judgment based on novels that come later.

More interestingly, in “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler simultaneously recognizes the effects of historical change on literature and yet asserts a necessary feature of the detective story that defies that recognition. His discussion of detective fiction is developed out of two axioms: that “fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic” and, yet, that the “mystery novel is” “seldom” realistic.<sup>34</sup> Defending against potential reactions to the former claim, Chandler explains that even if “old-fashioned novels [...] now seem stilted and artificial to the point of burlesque,” they would have not “appear[ed] that way to the people who first read them.”<sup>35</sup> So, for instance, while “Austen’s chronicles of highly inhibited people against a background of rural gentility” may appear outdated in one way, “they seem real enough psychologically.”<sup>36</sup> When it comes to the dated detective story, however, a similar argument can not be made. Instead, it seems that its existence as a genre is what has prevented it from being realistic. He writes:

The hero’s tie may be a little off the mode and the good gray inspector may arrive in a dogcart instead of a streamlined sedan with siren screaming, but what he does when he gets there is the same old futzing around with timetables and bits of

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<sup>34</sup> Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” *Selections: Later Novel and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 977.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

charred paper and who trampled the jolly old flowering arbutus under the library window.<sup>37</sup>

But all this makes no difference because what “makes people read it never goes out of style.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, there is a preponderance of novels that fulfill the generic laws without being very good because what would make them very good would be even the slightest infusion of realism and truth.

The author who does succeed at this is Dashiell Hammett, for Chandler, and he devotes the second portion of his essay to Hammett’s realism. Relevant for my purposes is the way that Chandler answers the charge of people who say “that Hammett didn’t write detective stories at all, merely hard-boiled chronicles of mean streets with a perfunctory mystery element dropped in like the olive in a martini.”<sup>39</sup> Of such detractors, Chandler writes that they are: “the flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex)—who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not care to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite cruelty.”<sup>40</sup> Hammett “gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse.”<sup>41</sup> It, therefore, does not matter that his stories do not “pose a formal and exact problem and arrange the clues around it with neat labels on them.”<sup>42</sup> So, even though the fact that “no one concerns himself with who killed Spade’s partner, Archer,”<sup>43</sup> *The Maltese Falcon* is as good as *The Glass Key*; what they both share is the “effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 979.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. p. 990.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 989.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 990.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 991; in fact, this is not quite the case—it is suggested that the police suspect Spade because he was having an affair with Archer’s wife, and, by the end of the novel, Spade reveals that he knew all along that it was O’Shaughnessy who actually shot Archer.

elucidation of character.”<sup>44</sup> And this, Chandler concludes, “is all the detective story has any right to be about anyway.”<sup>45</sup>

Again, while it may obscure the processes of history moving through genre and vice versa, this true genre criticism (as opposed to historicist uses of genre to assert historical continuity) is of use in so far as it preserves historical moments. That is, while it treats its own historically specific perspective as universal and ahistorical, it nevertheless preserves a moment when a historically specific consciousness grapples with past institutions. Through the features that seem essential to one generation but artificial to another, through what one generation takes for granted as logical and another deems contrived, and so on, we can read the common sense of different historical eras.

The characteristic of our particular cultural moment from which I begin my investigation is the proliferation of detective entertainment and the proliferation of the use of detective story conventions in other kinds of edu-tainment, especially television history, anthropology, and archeology programs. As I will demonstrate over the course of this project, the reason for this proliferation has always been contained in the detective narrative structure, as has the reason why it should seem useful for structuring historical investigation, so I am not intending to claim something radically new that characterizes the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 21<sup>st</sup>. Instead, it is a matter of the preponderance of such programs. Whether they are a symptom or whether they will be a cause, the proliferation of such programs threatens to swamp cultural common sense and folklore with the idea that history, the truth, and reality are accessible through the simple reconstruction of facts and evidence, as if facts and evidence could exist without theory and ideology. The certainty with which these programs treat the discovery of the truth of the past

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



threatens history with the domination of a positivistic approach that, through the special agency of the detective narrative structure, leaves no apparent gaps.

In order to intervene in the story such stories tell about history, in the following chapters I will demonstrate that the origins of the detective story lie not in the discovery of a method of ascertaining (the) identity (of the criminal) but in the discovery that the bourgeois era of history will have to make up for its lack of origins and will have to hide its revolution in the appearance of continuity, something for which the detective narrative structure is designed. In order to do so, however, the reign of the Sherlock Holmes stories over the genre in both the popular imagination and in many recent critical examinations needs to be challenged. Treated recently by academic critics as the original for the genre, and enjoying a revival in such television crime dramas as the British “Cracker” and more recently “Waking the Dead” and the American “Law and Order” and “CSI” dramas, especially “Law and Order: Criminal Intent,” the Sherlock Holmes story paradigm must be therefore treated as an emblem for the current “moment of danger” in the present from which I begin this study.

## **1.2 “KNOWING WHERE TO LOOK”?**

Though they have always held a prominent place in the popular imagination of all things detective, in recent years the Sherlock Holmes stories have been taken up by cultural historians and critics as central to and sufficient for an analysis of the entire genre’s historicity. Particularly attractive to recent critics has been the idea, perhaps best articulated by Benjamin, that “the original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s

traces in the big-city crowd.”<sup>46</sup> That is, in recent criticism, the genre’s historical phenomenality is considered to have to do with the effect of the physical conditions, real and popularly perceived, of the modern metropolis on social order. According to Benjamin, the detective story is allied with what he calls “a multifarious web of registrations” designed to “compensate” “for the fact that the disappearance of people in the masses of the big cities leaves no traces.”<sup>47</sup> As such, it is the symbolic equivalent of all kinds of measures designed to regulate modern life and keep track of the cities’ multitudes.

Extending this thesis, Tom Gunning argues: “attempts to reestablish the traces of individual identity beneath the obscurity of a new mobility were central to both the actual processes of police detection and the genesis of detective fiction.”<sup>48</sup> For Gunning, “the narrative form of the detective story [...] depends explicitly upon the modern experience of circulation,”<sup>49</sup> which for him is simply the process of moving commodities around and the consequent ability this new infrastructure gives people to move around. Gunning sees this “new mobility” as producing a “dialectical drama.” He argues that “while circulation relies on an evolving process of rationalization of time and space, the very intricacy and speed of these routes of transfer and exchange create a counterthrust in which stability and predictability can be threatened.”<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, “the detective story maps out two positions in this dialectical drama of modernity: the criminal, who preys on the very complexity of the system of circulation; and the detective,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> Tom Gunning, “Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema,” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Eds, Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

whose intelligence, knowledge, and perspicacity allow him to discover the dark corners of the circulatory system, uncover crime, and restore order.”<sup>51</sup>

On further thought, however, these formulations of the historicity of the detective story should seem somewhat peculiar. As popular parlance has it, the detective story’s structural principle is an investigation into “whodunit,” whereas what Gunning’s and Benjamin’s formulations have in common is the assumption that the central question of the detective story is: “where is the person whodunit?” And so, in neither of these accounts does the investigation of multiple suspects, the hypothesization of motives, the struggle to decide what interpretative matrix to use to read the fragments of information, and finally the struggle to decide which fragments of information are to count as signs to be interpreted and which are to be discarded as insignificant (i.e., ‘non-signifying’) play a role. In short, in neither of these accounts do the actual processes we have come to associate with *detection* actually figure. Instead, in each account, the detective story is defined as beginning after detection has already taken place, that the criminal is already known, and that the real trouble is knowing where to find him. On the most basic level, these accounts are simply wrong—the detective narrative has very little to do with simply tracking the criminal. There is, however, something in the Sherlock Holmes stories (though Benjamin does not explicitly concern himself with the Holmes stories) that authorizes this reading, namely the association of Holmes’ method with the work of the sleuth.

In fact, there is a provenance for thinking that the detective story, at least as it is represented by the Sherlock Holmes stories, is about recovering traces of individuals, and it is contained in the popular image of Holmes as the Great Sleuth, a provenance traced by historian Carlo Ginzburg. Though Ginzburg’s interest is not specifically in tracing the origins of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

detective story, per se, but in explaining the emergence of what he calls the “presumptive paradigm” that “began to assert itself in the humane sciences” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>52</sup> the genealogy he develops helps clarify exactly what sleuthing is and ultimately provides a basis for examining the relationship between sleuthing and detecting. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, and the work of art historian Giovanni Morelli, Ginzburg finds a common method of using “infinitesimal traces” to “comprehen[d...] a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality: traces—more precisely, symptoms (in the case of Freud), clues (in the case of Sherlock Holmes), pictorial marks (in the case of Morelli).”<sup>53</sup> Trying to understand what these three instances of the paradigm have in common, Ginzburg temporarily establishes the most immediate connection between their methods and epistemological models: each has a background in “medical semiotics”—“that discipline which permits the diagnosis of diseases inaccessible to direct observation based on superficial symptoms.”<sup>54</sup> However, he argues, the “roots” of this paradigm are “much older.”<sup>55</sup>

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ginzburg moves to early history to find the “morphological” echo of this paradigm in “an oriental fable that circulated among Kirghiz, Tartars, Jews, Turks, and others.”<sup>56</sup> It is “the story of three brothers who meet a man who has lost a camel,”<sup>57</sup> a story also re-enacted by Umberto Eco’s detective, Brother William of Baskerville, in *The Name of the Rose*. Asked if they have seen the animal, the brothers are able to “describe it for him,” telling him that “it is white, blinded in one eye, and carries two goat-skins on its back, one full of wine,

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<sup>52</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

the other of oil.”<sup>58</sup> Ginzburg recounts that the brothers are “brought to trial” for stealing the camel because they know so much about the animal but deny having seen him. Instead, they prove themselves innocent by “demonstrat[ing] [...] how, by means of myriad small clues, they could reconstruct the appearance of an animal on which they have never laid eyes.”<sup>59</sup> Ginzburg concludes that “the three brothers are repositories of some sort of venatic lore, even if they are not necessarily hunters,”<sup>60</sup> and reads in this fable the traces of a pre-historic knowledge: the knowledge developed by early man as “he learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors,”<sup>61</sup> etc. What Ginzburg notes in particular about the oriental fable and the knowledge it represents is the way that “the data is always arranged by the observer in such a way as to produce a narrative sequence, which could be expressed most simply as ‘someone passed this way’.”<sup>62</sup> From this he assays that “the actual idea of narration (as distinct from charms, exorcisms, or invocation) may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks.”<sup>63</sup>

However, while Ginzburg is cautiously tracing what seems to be an instance of historical continuity that could potentially lead to the idea that the detective narrative is as old as human history,<sup>64</sup> he also indirectly provides evidence for a reading of the Holmes stories as actually discontinuous with this hunting paradigm. Particularly, Ginzburg’s historical work intervenes in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ginzburg is aware of the lure of what Jameson calls a “positive hermeneutic.” As a result, he carefully notes the aporia in the history he is attempting to trace and continually insists upon skepticism with regard to the efficacy of using morphological resemblance as a tool for historical reconstruction.<sup>64</sup> As such, while he is tracing what he thinks possibly to be a continuity over time, his careful analysis also lends itself to an intervention in the common sense notion that the detective is simply “a hunter of men.”

the acceptance of sleuthing as a synonym for detective work. One of the first meanings the OED gives of the word “sleuth,” which it traces back to Old English, is “the track or trail of a person or animal,” a word that lends itself to the follower of such tracks or trails, the “sleuth-hound,” which in turn becomes a metaphor for the detective. Sleuthing is clearly related to hunting. And, the words “sleuth” and “slough” might share a history though the OED does not make this connection, deeming the origins of the word “slough” to be uncertain. “Slough” means both “a piece of soft, miry, or muddy ground” and “the outer or scarf of skin periodically cast or shed by a snake, adder, or similar reptile,” the latter also functioning as the verb meaning “to shed” an outer layer. Though it would take the work of an etymologist to definitively clarify whatever connections there may be between the two words, their variants, and other related words (such as “slow”), Ginzburg’s analysis of the story of the three brothers is suggestive of a connection between the separate words. The two meanings of “slough” suggest two ways in which a sleuth could follow the track or trail of an animal: by physical leavings like sloughed skin, “excrement, tufts of hair,” etc. and/or by the imprint a quarry might leave behind on impressionable physical surroundings.

Not surprisingly, it is Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes who indicates the trick of sleuthing in an early dialogue with Watson in which he is forced to reiterate his methodology due to Watson’s patent inability to retain the impression of his explanations. The story, “A Case of Identity,”<sup>65</sup> is about a woman whose stepfather, thinly disguised in tinted spectacles (a detail which is itself a thinly disguised theft from Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”), courts her and leaves her at the altar in order to assure that she never marries and therefore to secure her continuing contribution of an inheritance from her uncle to the household income. In this story, Holmes

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<sup>65</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Case of Identity (1891),” *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volume 1* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986).

once again demonstrates his ability to reconstruct from the mere “trifles” of a person’s appearance a whole set of events or life experiences, what Ginzburg calls “a method of interpretation based on discarded information” or otherwise “marginal data.”<sup>66</sup> Once again flummoxed, Watson declares that Holmes “appeared to read a good deal upon her which was quite invisible to [himself]”; but Holmes corrects him, pointing out that the details he attended to were “not invisible but unnoticed.”<sup>67</sup> He explains: “You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that was important.”<sup>68</sup>

It is on the strength of always “knowing where to look” that Holmes appears to be the “great sleuth,” but it is here where Ginzburg’s discussion of tracking helps illuminate an important distinction between sleuthing and Holmes’ practices. Indeed, it is only the first Sherlock Holmes story—*A Study in Scarlet* (1887)—that exemplifies sleuthing; and even as it is doing so, it is also exposing its tenuous place in the detective story. Having been called to the scene of the murder, Holmes begins his investigation by observing the surroundings of the house some yards before they reach it, literally looking for tracks. Fortunately, because it has rained the night before, leaving the ground slough-like, Holmes is able to detect cab-tracks not left by anyone who has since approached the scene. Closer to the house, despite the fact that officers and onlookers have trampled back and forth, he is able to pick out the tracks of both the victim and the murderer and to deduce information from them. Having studied the environs and the scene of the crime in a way that reminds Watson of a “pure-blooded, well-trained foxhound,”<sup>69</sup> Holmes concludes:

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<sup>66</sup> Ginzburg, p. 101.

<sup>67</sup> Conan Doyle, “A Case of Identity,” p. 260.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *A Study in Scarlet, Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volume 1* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), p. 26.

‘There has been a murder done, and the murderer was a man. He was more than six feet high, was in the prime of life, had small feet for his height, wore coarse, square-toed boots and smoked a Trichinopoly cigar. He came here with his victim in a four-wheeled cab, which was drawn by a horse with three old shoes and one new one on his off fore-leg. In all probability the murderer had a florid face, and the finger-nails of his right hand were remarkably long.’<sup>70</sup>

Later, Holmes explains to Watson how the length of the stride and the impression of the footprints helped him to determine the murderer’s height, gait, and the rest, and how the scratches on the plaster, made when the perpetrator was writing in blood on the wall, told him that the man’s fingernails are long. In short, Holmes is able to reconstruct the type of man the murderer is by the impressions he himself leaves on the scene.

While this part of Holmes’ investigation exemplifies sleuthing, other parts simultaneously introduce and repress a fundamental difference between tracking animals and discovering the identity of absent human beings. Discovered at the scene of the crime, written “in blood-red letters” on a bare wall is the “single word—RACHE.”<sup>71</sup> Lestrade, the perpetually off-the-mark police detective who found it, concludes that the murderer had been intending to write the name Rachel “but was disturbed before he or she had time to finish,” a conclusion that leads him to further believe that “when this case comes to be cleared up, you will find that a woman named Rachel has something to do with it.”<sup>72</sup> At this, Holmes “burst[s] into an explosion of laughter”<sup>73</sup> and corrects the assumption by pointing out that “‘rache,’ is the German

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



word for ‘revenge’.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, he decides that the writing of the word is only “a blind intended to put the police upon a wrong track, by suggesting Socialism and secret societies.”<sup>75</sup> Holmes explains: “It was not done by a German. The A, if you noticed, was printed somewhat after the German fashion. Now, a real German invariably prints in the Latin character, so that we may safely say that this was not written by one, but by a clumsy imitator who overdid his part.”<sup>76</sup>

Again, what this latter interpretation exposes is the fundamental difference between reconstructing the identity of an individual from traces of his or her presence and reconstructing the genus and movements of an animal. Wholly lacking in the latter but a given in the former is the ability to purposefully manipulate signs so as to give the *wrong* impression. It is a faculty that alters the more or less direct or transparent relationship between a store of knowledge (which, in sleuthing, is the synthesis of past experience), the observation of details, the interpretation of those details as signs, and the prediction of future movements or the ability to ascertain a situation from which one is absent. With the recognition that signs can be manipulated comes an interruption in the direct application of one’s knowledge to observed details. Instead of being able to interpret signs directly according to laws of general, instinctual behavior, interpretation must proceed from wariness with regard to all signs. There is no way to know in advance which apparently inadvertent self-betraying signs are deliberately left to confound the tracker. Indeed, even though Lestrade’s hypothesis is treated with scorn, it does follow the sleuthing paradigm more faithfully in so far as it imagines the writing to be as straightforward a record of the murderer’s psychology as do the footprints and other physical marks inadvertently left behind by him function as a record of his physical appearance.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

In this story, Holmes appears to overcome this problem through a process that appears to be related to sleuthing. The “A” that is actually not the way a German would print it even though it is a German “A” is the observable detail that leads Holmes to his conclusion that it is a sign meant to mislead. However, the very nature of falsified signs defies so easy a solution. Once introduced, the possibility that a sign is arranged to mislead throws into doubt all premises. Also, its meaning does not simply become the opposite of the truth; instead, the possibilities for its meaning are multiplied potentially infinitely. There is no definitive reading that clarifies why Holmes’ particular interpretation is correct, except of course that it is the work of the fiction to prove him correct. Beyond this, the difficulties that come with the manipulated sign remain unsolved.

As if recognizing this problem, after the first two novellas, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*, the typical Sherlock Holmes story avoids this disconnect between interpreting accidental traces and interpreting manipulated signs by keeping Holmes’ ability to read signs mostly separate from his ability to reconstruct past events and predict outcomes (i.e., solve crimes or mysteries). As a response to the problem of *not* knowing where to look nor how to interpret what one discovers without prior experience of the particular human animal, its aims, and how it will behave in relationship to those aims, Holmes’ trick of noticing trifles and reconstructing from them “complex realities” that he has not observed is predominantly confined to his clients, that is, to people who have no reason to fake signs. And he solves crimes by decoding what are to his clients illegible details and situations but what are to him transparent, thanks to his vast store of knowledge, a store that becomes increasingly incredible.

Two good examples of this are “A Case of Identity” and “The Red-Headed League.” Already mentioned, “A Case of Identity” opens with a young woman coming to see Holmes to

ask for his help in finding her missing fiancé. Miss Sutherland gives Holmes several details about her life that Watson finds irrelevant to the matter of her missing fiancé: she has an income from her uncle—the interest paid on £2500; she was not “best pleased” when her mother “married again so soon after [her] father’s death” especially since he is both much younger and has more elevated class pretensions; and she intends to continue signing her income over to her mother while she continues to live there. She then gets to her fiancé, how she met him, and the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. She explains that she met Mr. Hosmer Angel at a ball that her stepfather had forbidden her to attend but that her mother agreed to when he was out of town. Holmes also elicits from her the fact that her stepfather suddenly changes his attitude when he returns and finds out that she did go to the ball. In her reminiscences, she also reveals that her fiancé used a typewriter for the letters that he wrote her. And as she goes on telling Holmes that “he was a very shy man” and that he preferred to “walk with [her] in the evening,”<sup>77</sup> her fiancé sounds more and more suspicious to the skeptical listener.

He’d had the quinsy and swollen glands when he was young, he told me, and it had left him with a weak throat, and a hesitating, whispering fashion of speech. He was always well-dressed, very neat and plain, but his eyes were weak, just as mine are, and he wore tinted glasses against the glare.<sup>78</sup>

From the very moment she gives Holmes these details, and the detail that she only would see her fiancé when her stepfather went out of town, Holmes knows the answer to the mystery. Her fiancé is none other than her stepfather who has disguised himself to woo her and who has done so to secure her heart to a non-existent man as a way to ensure that she will never marry and take her income out of his household.

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<sup>77</sup> “A Case of Identity,” p. 257.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Once again, this story recognizes and represses the truly destabilizing fact of the manipulability of outward signs. Mr. Windibank's disguise mocks the surface legibility of character and identity, while the transparency of the disguise to Holmes' mind reasserts the fantasy of surface legibility. However, Holmes' readings are not reproducible nor methodological. He offers no single mode of perspicacity that penetrates all manner of manipulations. One always need Holmes himself to see through disguise. And it is not his method, but his infinite store of knowledge that ultimately underwrites his infallibility. The myth of Holmes' encyclopedic knowledge continually grows so that the world can appear to Holmes an already mastered whole, where every seemingly disconnected piece of information has already been seen in the correct light. Indeed, in the first Holmes short story Conan Doyle writes after he has reconciled himself to Holmes' popularity, we are given the detail that "for many years [Holmes] had adopted a system of docketing all paragraphs concerning men and things, so that it was difficult to name a subject or a person on which he could not at once furnish information."<sup>79</sup> The reason this larger and larger store of knowledge is necessary is that it fills the gap in the logical contradiction of Holmes' methodology. What is at the center of Holmes' methodology and what his generally guileless clients cannot recognize is that signs are easily manipulated. Holmes usually solves the mystery at hand by injecting a simple and small modicum of skepticism regarding persons' motives, something which usually renders hitherto opaque behavior transparent; but, by that same token, Holmes' own easy solutions for the meaning behind the behaviors and situations that appear to be mysterious are not adequate to the task of putting the multiplicity of possibilities for the truth to rest.

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<sup>79</sup> "A Scandal in Bohemia," p. 215.

This is demonstrated in “The Red-headed League,” another story of a con. Their client, Mr. Jabez Wilson, comes to them with a bizarre story. His new assistant at the pawnshop he owns had come to him one day with an advertisement of a job with an organization called “The League of Red-headed Men,” an organization whose sole purpose is to employ men with red hair at £4 a week to “copy out the Encyclopædia Britannica.”<sup>80</sup> He is urged by his assistant to apply for the job, and he ends up being the only one chosen for the position despite the fact that “from north, south, east, and west every man who had a shade of red in his hair had tramped into the city to answer the advertisement.”<sup>81</sup> Not a complete idiot, Wilson suspects that it might be “some great hoax or fraud,” but not being able to figure out “what its object might be”<sup>82</sup> and being encouraged by his assistant to give it a try, he shows up the next day. The only rules that he has to follow are to copy out the encyclopedia and, if he wants to take a break, that he may not leave the building at all or else “forfeit [...his] whole position forever.”<sup>83</sup> He shows up day after day until one day the office is suddenly closed and deserted with a notice announcing that “The Red-Headed League is Dissolved.”<sup>84</sup>

Wilson has come to consult Holmes because he can find no trace of the “Red-headed League” but doesn’t want to “lose such a place without a struggle.”<sup>85</sup> Holmes, however, is interested in the case because he suspects that “graver issues hang from it than might at first sight appear.”<sup>86</sup> This does indeed turn out to be true. Of course, the League was a ruse; but its aim was to ensure Wilson’s absence from his home and shop. Upon hearing the story and learning where Wilson’s shop is, Holmes realizes immediately that Wilson’s assistant is involved in a

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<sup>80</sup> “The Red-headed League,” p. 234.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

conspiracy to rob the bank that backs onto the building in which Wilson has his shop, something Holmes knows because “it is a hobby of [his] to have an exact knowledge of London.”<sup>87</sup> Needing simply to confirm this, Holmes goes to Wilson’s shop. When he gets there, he asks directions from Wilson’s assistant as a pretense for getting a look at him. Once he does, Holmes tells Watson that: “he is, in my judgment, the fourth smartest man in London, and for daring I am not sure that he has not a claim to be third.”<sup>88</sup> By way of explaining this, he adds, “I have known something of him before.”<sup>89</sup> He has also noticed that the assistant’s trouser knees were worn and dusty. This plus the hollow sound that he discovers when he “thump[s] vigorously upon the pavement with his stick two or three times”<sup>90</sup> confirms him in his conclusion that the assistant wanted Wilson out of the house so that he could dig a tunnel from Wilson’s basement to the bank’s. The story concludes with Holmes and Watson and the police lying in wait at the bank for robbers. And so, once again, Holmes draws upon his vast, encyclopedic knowledge to solve the mystery.

It is worth pausing for a moment to review the relationship between Holmes’ vast reservoir of knowledge and “knowing where to look.” Returning to the hunting paradigm for a moment, we can see that the hunter knows where to look because his experience of his prey combined with the prey’s predictability dictates that certain bits of sensory input are signs while others are not. The story of the three brothers actually idealizes the praxis of the hunter. Eco’s rewriting of the fable demonstrates this well. As Brother William of Baskerville and Adso climb the path toward the Benedictine abbey, they meet the abbey’s cellarer and other monks coming toward them, searching for the abbot’s horse. Like the brothers of the ancient tale, Brother

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

William is able to tell them what the horse looks like and where it has gone even though he has not seen him. Once the search party leaves them to go after the horse, Adso, Brother William's Watson, asks him to explain his methods. William tells him that he was able to deduce the shape of the horse's hooves by its prints in the snow; and he was able to deduce the size of the horse because he had noticed some of the horse's black tail hairs caught on "one of the blackberry bushes where the animal must have turned to take the path to his right."<sup>91</sup> He is also, more strikingly, correct in saying that the animal had a "small head, sharp ears, [and] big eyes"<sup>92</sup> and that the animal's name was Brunellus even though these do not correspond to any physical traces the animal has left behind on the environment. This, he explains to Adso, is a matter of knowing the social environment. The fact that the cellarer himself is searching for the animal tells William that the animal is the best of the abbot's stables. Because Brother William is conversant with an authoritative text on equine beauty and knows the abbot would be, too, he infers that the features he has attributed to the horse—the features esteemed by the text—must be those the horse possesses, or, what amounts to the same thing for his purposes, must be those that "the monks firmly believe he [possesses]."<sup>93</sup> And, if this is the case, then the horse must be named Brunellus because this is what he would be named.

At first, this would seem to mimic the tracking that we are attributing to the hunter. By coordinating a set of observed physical leavings, Brother William can determine both the nature of the animal and the direction it took. However, there is a small but important difference between the situation presented to us in Eco's book and the situation of the hunter, a difference that raises a question with regard to knowing where to look. Eco's detective was not searching

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<sup>91</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

for anything when he discovered what *would become* evidence of the horse's passing. This raises the question of how William knew where to look. He notices a particular set of details that, put together, add up to the impression of a single animal; but how did he detect these particular details out of all the observable details available to him? How did he know where to look if he did not know what he was looking for? In the situation of the hunter imagined by Ginzburg, there would presumably be a relatively finite set of prey and predators to look out for, while this is not so with even this relatively empty environment. Are we to imagine that Brother William was able to take in all the observable details of his environment and only select, after the fact, the details that retrospectively added up to the impression of the horse? In this particular case, the answer is yes. This little vignette is the introduction to a character who continually insists that "the world speaks to us like a great book" and whose interest is in deciphering the "endless array of symbols with which God, through His creatures speaks to us of the eternal life" but also in the way the universe speaks "of closer things," of earthly matters.<sup>94</sup> Brother William is a character who is always absorbing details as potential signs. However, the environment also makes his deductions more credible. The mountain is covered with freshly fallen snow, a medium that more readily takes impressions and also renders those impressions more visible, just as the abandoned house in which *A Study in Scarlet's* murder takes place makes the necessary information more easily discovered. Ultimately, though, it is his remarkable store of knowledge that supplements the scant details he detects in his surroundings.

As an homage to Holmes' special abilities, this portrait is enlightening. It reveals how the reliance upon, and hence the growth of, gnosis increasingly supplements the praxis of sleuthing. Indeed, in the short stories, there is a kind of reversal of sleuthing. For instance, in "A

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.



Case of Identity,” Holmes is able to tell where the subject, in this case Miss Sutherland, has been, so to speak, rather than reading some environment from which she is absent. He is able to surprise her with his knowledge that she is short-sighted, that she is a typewritist, and that she left home in a hurry.<sup>95</sup> These things he was able to ascertain by noticing: the “dint of a pince-nez at either side of her nose”<sup>96</sup>; “the double line a little above the wrist, where the typewritist presses against the table,” on her right sleeve<sup>97</sup>; and that “though the boots which she was wearing were not unlike each other, they were really odd ones.”<sup>98</sup> He plays the same game with Watson at the beginning of “A Scandal in Bohemia,” observing to Watson that he is “in practice again,” that he has “been getting [himself] very wet lately, and that [he has] a most clumsy and careless servant girl.”<sup>99</sup> With regard to the first deduction, he explains: “if a man walks into my rooms smelling of iodoform, with a black mark of nitrate of silver upon his right forefinger, and a bulge on the right side of his top-hat to show where he has secreted his stethoscope, I must be dull, indeed, if I do not pronounce him to be an active member of the medical profession.”<sup>100</sup> And as to the other details, he has observed minute cuts on Watson’s boots that tell him that someone “has very carelessly scraped round the edges of the sole in order to remove crusted mud from it.”<sup>101</sup> In another story, he is able to say where Watson has been because of the color of the mud on his boots.<sup>102</sup> In this way, a sleuth-like performance comes to function as a disguise for something wholly different. Indeed, the fact that Watson is never able to reproduce this “method” with any success is a tell-tale sign. And so, far from indicating a

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<sup>95</sup> “A Case of Identity,” pp. 253-254.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> “A Scandal in Bohemia,” p. 210.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *The Sign of Four*, p. 110.

continuous generic line that links early human activity to modernity, the Holmes stories rather reveal sleuthing to be a disparate element.

This is not to say, however, that there is no textual occasion for introducing the concept of sleuthing to an analysis of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Indeed, the number of times Watson likens Holmes-at-work to a bloodhound manifests Conan Doyle's own sense that detection and sleuthing are synonymous. Why it is then necessary to intervene in the conflation between the two is that sleuthing indicates some kind of historical negotiation. Sleuthing, or the tracking of individuals through space, that is, is not itself the trace or symptom of the ideological subtext of the detective story; instead, it is the belief in and the desire for the kind of historical continuity that sleuthing represents that is the clue to the hidden reality to which the detective story responds.

On a closer look, we begin to realize that the Sherlock Holmes stories have very little to do with discovering the identity of individuals and very little to do with the capturing of criminals. Franco Moretti argues that the detective story, as read through the Sherlock Holmes stories, exists to demonize and criminalize individuality, discovering the underlying equations of the Holmes stories: "innocence is conformity; individuality, guilt."<sup>103</sup> I would say, on the contrary, by virtue of many of the same structural details upon which Moretti focuses,<sup>104</sup> that the Holmes stories exist to deny individuality altogether; and this is what the absence of all but the gesture of sleuthing indicates. Precisely the reason why the sleuthing paradigm cannot be simply and directly employed in the investigation of a crime is also precisely the reason that the

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<sup>103</sup> Franco Moretti, "Clues," *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer (London: Verso, 1983), p. 135.

<sup>104</sup> Moretti's argument is that the detective story exists to "dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social," p. 135; it is this that compels him to conclude that individuality in all its forms must be both constructed and criminalized. My argument, on the other hand, is that individuality is not constructed but denied, proven illusory.

sleuthing paradigm is so compelling: individuals, especially individuals intending to ‘erase their tracks’ like perpetrators of crime, are not legible and predictable through knowledge of types. Meanwhile, the typical Holmes story is only preoccupied with the reduction of the apparently individual person and the apparently unique mystery to typicality. So, for instance, the solution to the disappearance of Mr. Hosmer Angel is something Holmes is able to figure out by virtue of the fact that such a cruel ruse is exactly the kind of thing that a *type* like Mr. Windibank would perpetrate because of the assurance he himself has that a *type* like Miss Sutherland would be susceptible to certain kinds of charms and would remain ever faithful to her first love.

With this in mind, we can better understand the function of the evocation of sleuthing, the use of sleuthing metaphors to mask the non-detection of the Holmes stories. The Holmes stories promise, or at least exercise the desire for, a science capable of classifying humanity taxonomically, a science capable of rendering individuals predictable and of acting as a method for discerning mental and emotional characteristics through physical appearance. In this way, the Holmes stories share an affinity less with the invention and use of the mugshot, as Gunning argues,<sup>105</sup> and more with the dark side of criminology, the eugenics of such persons as Francis Galton, sharing the desire to render human individuals simple, single instances of types. Though I cannot furnish this study with a complete analysis of the affinities between the Holmes stories, the so-called science of criminology of Alphonse Bertillon, and the eugenics of Francis Galton, I hope that a brief discussion of the latter will suffice to introduce what is at stake in resituating the Sherlock Holmes stories in relationship to detection.

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<sup>105</sup> Gunning gives credence to the idea that “Holmes’s method opens onto a peculiarly modern world in which the forces of everyday life can mark people as deeply as an officially applied branding iron. While the complex maze of urban circulation provides a thicket in which individual identity can be concealed, it also marshals the factors which imprint the bodies of individuals with their own history,” p. 22; on the contrary, the only factors of modern life that really mark bodies are factors specific to the working class, i.e., labor and poverty. It would have to be the case, then, that the Holmes stories serve to maintain the boundary between the working classes and the upper classes, whereas the Holmes stories are always set in and concerned with the machinations of ‘respectable society’.

In his *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, Francis Galton fabricates a set of taxonomic principles by which human beings can be classified.<sup>106</sup> That human beings *can* be classified and that their types *can* be read on the surface of the body is something Galton ‘demonstrates’ through his “composite portraiture.” Apparently certain that he is describing a scientific method for ascertaining “representative faces,”<sup>107</sup> Galton describes the process of creating composite portraiture. He explains that he begins with “photographic portraits of different persons, all of whom had been photographed in the same aspect (say full face);” “reduced their portraits photographically to the same size, being guided as to scale by the distance between any two convenient points of reference in the features;” and then “superimpos[ing] the portraits like the leaves of the book, so that the features of each portrait lay as exactly as the case admitted, in front of those of the one behind it, eye in front of eye and mouth in front of mouth.”<sup>108</sup> After fixing these leaves, he then takes a photograph of each image while exposing the same plate. The erasure of individuality thus produced is a positive value for Galton; he writes: “the effect of composite portraiture is to bring into evidence all the traits in which there is agreement, and to leave but a ghost of a trace of individual peculiarities.”<sup>109</sup> But while Galton believes that he is engaging in a process of uncovering or highlighting basic characteristics in relation to which individuality is only superficial ornamentation, he is in fact producing a single image that is built upon erasure. In so far as the process involves continually exposing to light some areas of the plate more than others, central areas that have been determined and regulated by Galton himself in the pre-photographic process—so that everyone’s nose is in the same place, for instance—any actual peculiarity of feature in those areas will be

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<sup>106</sup> Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1911).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

erased by the subsequent exposure. And so, *pace* Galton's assurance that "there are so many traits in common in all faces that the composite picture when made from many components is far from being a blur,"<sup>110</sup> in the plates he provides, the features of the images produced in this way are such that it is difficult to imagine being able to determine an individual's resemblance to the image. Or rather, it is difficult to imagine not being able to see any individual's resemblance to the image.

However, it is the revealed purpose to which Galton imagines these images to be put that deserves the most scrutiny. In discussing the composite portrait "of twelve officers of the Royal Engineers with about an equal number of privates," Galton explains that "the individuals from whom this composite was made [...] differed considerably in feature, and they came from various parts of England."<sup>111</sup> Ignoring the fact that the subjects' considerable differences probably caused the composite to "not come out as clearly as [Galton] should have liked," something he treats in an aside, Galton still deems himself able to discover "the bodily and mental qualifications required for admission into their select corps, and their generally British descent."<sup>112</sup> But what does this mean? What counts as "generally British descent" in this instance (to say nothing of the shared "bodily and mental qualities")? As it is the Royal Engineers, and therefore as it consists of British citizens, the persons photographed are British; but Galton is making a leap from national identity to ethnic identity, from *de facto* belonging to natural belonging, from something that can be read on an identity card to something that can be read on the body. Even were it possible to discover a truly British ethnic identity, which would itself require mapping an arbitrary historical distinction onto the whole history of movement of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

various European tribes, is it not likely that some of those Royal Engineers are only nationally British, belonging to a history of citizens who are ethnically something else, and not ethnically British?

Galton indirectly answers this problem and reveals the real purpose of the composites. He writes of the Royal Engineers' composite that "this face and the qualities it connotes probably gives a clue to the direction in which the stock of the English race might most easily be improved."<sup>113</sup> He continues:

It is the essential notion of a race that there should be some ideal typical form from which the individuals may deviate in all directions, but about which they chiefly cluster. The easiest direction in which a race can be improved is towards that central type, because nothing new has to be sought out.<sup>114</sup>

In this passage, there is a complex interplay between the project of discovering and reducing to and the project of creating and building toward. Galton is suggesting that through some process of eugenics that the so-called "English race" develop itself along the lines of the best qualities he has "discovered" through his composite portraiture. He has not, however, really discovered anything but a means for creating a blank face that appears to have specific characteristics but which is also malleable enough to be fulfilled by what comes after, all the while that the claim to its existence authorizes brutal processes of selection and exclusion. That is, Galton forges a definite space for a national identity that authorizes in advance whatever that nation becomes, so long as the persons in charge of reading the images are the ones to determine it. His composites are blank warrants.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

In turn, this desire to control the development of the so-called English race, to foreclose upon certain kinds of difference, and to master society with a set of centripetal imperatives is legible in the structure of the Holmes stories. Underneath all the apparent activity by which Holmes endeavors to gather sufficient evidence to prove to Watson what he already knows to be the truth, the Holmes stories are essentially locked-room mysteries.<sup>115</sup> All the information needed to solve the mystery is provided by the naïve client but in a form masked by the naïveté of the client so that the operations of discovering the solution are all a matter of mentally changing the character and nature of the details. In fact, more than a matter of Holmes knowing “where to look,” it is rather the case that Holmes knows *how* to look, not what details to notice—because the relevant details are relatively few enough that they can all be taken in at once—but how to read and re-read the details presented. Moreover, it is worth noting that if it weren’t for the physical presence of his clients in the parlor where he receives them, “looking” would have no place at all in the solution of the mystery. As in locked-room mysteries, visual details are meant to be rethought not re-seen—one never protests that one cannot solve a locked-room mystery because one needs to search the scene of the crime once more. Instead, the skill of knowing where to look is obviated by the fact that the details are carefully chosen to exclude all that is not relevant to the solution. All the details provided stand out against a backdrop of blankness, an empty room or freshly fallen snow.

Making apparent this disjuncture between what actually happens in the Holmes stories and its masquerade as sleuthing, then, also makes apparent what has been disguised, namely, the individual or the problem of the individual. Not just the individual person, but the singular, the

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<sup>115</sup> Moretti’s reading of the locked-room mystery is that it signifies private space as a threat; “the door was invented by the bourgeoisie to protect the individual; now it becomes a threat; one is advised never to turn the key”—p. 136.

atypical and unpredictable appear in the disjuncture as the thing that is intolerable. In the Holmes stories, it is that which renders the possibility of meaning in relationship to signs potentially infinite and infinitely something other than what they appear. This is what crime and the criminal represent in the Holmes stories: the existence of any number of things that defy the legibility of signs according to a single code, an existence that renders the problem of knowing where to look—knowing what to focus on in the world of sensory information—as permanently problematic as is the problem of knowing how to look. For Moretti, the equation between criminality and individuality is a matter of making the individual responsible for the contradictions and structural inconsistencies of the society produced by the capitalist mode of production, in short for “crime” in an expanded sense. Meanwhile, I am arguing that crime itself is a disguise for the problems of interpretation and meaning that accompany the proliferating systems of interpretation that are an indirect consequence of capitalism—i.e., that crime is the disguise and not the thing being disguised.

### **1.3 INVENTING CRIME**

When Benjamin claims that “the original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd,” he bases his claim partially on a reading of an Edgar Allan Poe story—“The Man of the Crowd”—onto which he projects his assumption that tracking the criminal through the crowd is the structural principle of the detective story. Of “The



Man of the Crowd,” Benjamin writes that it “is something like the X-ray picture of a detective story.”<sup>116</sup> He continues:

In it, the drapery represented by crime has disappeared. The mere armature has remained: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man who arranges his walk through London in such a way that he always remains in the middle of the crowd.<sup>117</sup>

However, when Benjamin writes that “this unknown man is the *flâneur*,”<sup>118</sup> we realize that influencing his reading of the story is precisely the mental substitution he makes throughout the essay—the man of the crowd is, for Benjamin, Baudelaire. Likewise, the situation is very like Baudelaire’s “flight from his creditors,” during which “he went to cafés or reading circles,” “rov[ing] about in a city which had long since ceased to be home for the *flâneur*.”<sup>119</sup> Because of this substitution, however, the full range of possibilities for the drama of the story are limited to those in which the pursued man is an “asocial person.”<sup>120</sup> Benjamin’s reading of the story therefore seems to depend upon the assumption that the pursuer, who is also the narrator of the story, occupies the position of the detective while the man he pursues occupies the position of the criminal.

Without these assumptions, Poe’s story becomes one in which the pursuer and the pursued are locked into an endlessly reversing set of identities that have no outside, objective identification so much so that the designation “the man of the crowd” is equally apt for both pursuer and pursued, if not more apt for the pursuer. This is not to say that the narrator himself does not believe he is a detective, but to give this credence is also to give credence to the

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<sup>116</sup> Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” p. 48.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

narrator's paranoid fantasies. As he sits in a London café, the narrator finds himself contemplating the way that "men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes—die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed."<sup>121</sup> It is a speculation that raises the question of whether this narrator is "reliable." Or, is he one of Poe's studies in pathology? Never a decision that can be made with absolute certainty, there are two reasons to adduce in favor of the reading that this narrator is an ironic portrait. In the first place, this contemplation and the narrator's conclusion that the man he pursues in the story "is the type and the genius of deep crime" are not based in evidence, are instead based in a "logic" whereby a lack of evidence is deeper proof of crime and criminality, suggesting that the more we know of people without discovering evidence of their criminality is the more we can be sure they are diabolically criminal. The premise, then, can only proliferate assumptions and beliefs which can never lead to a revelation, even though the narrator believes he has such a revelation at the end of the story.

Consequently, we can also argue that the narrator is an ironic portrait of a man who only imagines himself to be a detective because he is so unlike Poe's *detective*, the Chevalier Auguste Dupin. For instance, in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," Dupin complains about the assumptions the original investigators make concerning Marie's disappearance and death. He explains to his companion that "they could picture to their imaginations a mode—many modes—and a motive—many motives; and because it was not impossible that either of these numerous modes and motives *could* have been the actual one, they have taken it for granted that one of them

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<sup>121</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd."

*must.*”<sup>122</sup> This is Dupin’s version of Holmes’ famous axiom that one should never “theorize before one has data” because “insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts,” and it is with untangling the mess in which such practices have put the investigation of Marie’s murder that Dupin is occupied in this story. Meanwhile, not only does the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” develop a logic directly opposed to that of his detective, he spends the entire story doing just that: choosing facts to fit his theory of crime.

Consequently, more illuminating of this narrator is Benjamin’s suggestion that:

[i]f the *flâneur* is [...] turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind his indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem.<sup>123</sup>

The narrator introduces himself to us as a man without occupation, sitting in a café “amusing [him]self [...] now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street.”<sup>124</sup> However, against his assertion that, having been recently ill, “merely to breathe was enjoyment,”<sup>125</sup> it is quickly clear that he craves a more active occupation to “accredit his idleness.” Purposeless people-watching seems to offer insufficient stimulation. Indeed, even though he deliberately praises his freedom to observe, the reader becomes aware of the narrator’s discomfort. Outwardly he revels in the opportunity of his idleness because “at this particular period of the evening [he] had never been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled [him], therefore with a

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<sup>122</sup> Poe, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume IV*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1965), p. 20.

<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire,” p. 42.

<sup>124</sup> Poe, “The Man of the Crowd.”

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

delicious novelty of emotion.”<sup>126</sup> His reaction to this situation, on the other hand, exposes an anxiety related to being out of his element.

In reaction, he immediately begins to divide the crowd into classes and types. “At first,” he tells us, his “observations took an abstract and generalizing turn,” “look[ing] at the passengers in masses, and [thinking] of them in their aggregate relations.”<sup>127</sup> Then, “however, [he] descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance,”<sup>128</sup> only to begin to reduce these variables to types of city-inhabitants. He gradually classifies everyone, moving through incremental degrees of objectification. The first “types” he observes are rendered in terms of their behavior and given a level of humanity that corresponds to their middle-class position, a position registered by the narrator’s classification of “their habiliments” as “belong[ing] to that order which is pointedly termed the decent.”<sup>129</sup> Of these, some had a “satisfied, business-like demeanor, and seemed to be thinking only of making their way through the press.” So that, “when pushed against by fellow-wayfarers they evinced no symptom of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on.”<sup>130</sup> The others of this class of the decent, on the other hand, “were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around.”<sup>131</sup> He then goes on to adumbrate the rest of the population of the crowd, dealing first with the “tribe of clerks” and the “the division of the upper clerks of staunch firms.”<sup>132</sup> Then, there are the “swell pick-pockets,” “the gamblers,” con-artists, and so on. His perusal becomes increasingly disdainful, ending in a

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

decided classism and racism. His attention comes to rest on “Jew pedlars” after, he tells us, “descending the scale of what is termed gentility,” then “professional street beggars,” “feeble and ghastly invalids,” and so on.

Whether the racism is Poe’s or simply the narrator’s is perhaps indecipherable, but we get more clues to the narrator’s potential pathology at the end of this “descent” through the crowd. He tells us:

As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene; for not only did the general character of the crowd materially alter (its gentler features retiring in the gradual withdrawal of the more orderly portion of the people, and its harsher ones coming out into bolder relief, as the late hour brought forth every species of infamy from its den), but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre.<sup>133</sup>

While the narrator perceives there to be two simultaneous occurrences—that “the character of the crowd materially alter[ed]” and the gaslights “threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre”—it is also possible to read the latter as the cause of the former, the crowd not so much “materially altering” as being altered to perception. Or, it is even possible that the narrator’s own psyche projects the “infamy” and the “garish lustre.” He is a narrator who has rejected the relationship between perceiving and knowing, after all.

What finally gives the narrator’s scrutinizing eye and suspicious mind a true occupation is an individual he perceives standing out from the crowd: “a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age” with “a countenance that at once arrested and absorbed [his] whole

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

attention, on the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression.” It is an expression he imagines to be the best depiction of “the fiend,” and “during the brief moment of [his] original survey,” he reads in his countenance “vast mental power, [...] caution, [...] penuriousness, [...] avarice, [...] coolness, [...] malice, [...] bloodthirstiness, [...] triumph, [...] merriment, [...] excessive terror,” and “supreme despair.” His “fascination” sparked by so “wild a history,” the narrator resolves “to keep the man in view—to know more of him.” Catching up with him after leaving the café, the narrator gets a closer look and thinks he catches a glimpse of “a diamond and a dagger,” something which “heightened [his] curiosity.”

He continues to follow the man, but not before tying a handkerchief around his mouth to ward off the damp from the now falling rain. Before he finally gives up, he follows the man for a night and a day—a time span suggesting restlessness and insomnia, a symptom in Poe’s work for mental illness. What he observes, he finds peculiar. The man manages to keep himself always in the deepest throng of the crowded city streets, hurrying his pace when he finds himself in lonelier quarters. At one point, the narrator follows the old man “into a square, brilliantly lighted, and overflowing with life.” The man “urged his way steadily and perseveringly” through the crowd, but “upon his having made the circuit of the square,” the narrator is “astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times—once nearly detecting [the narrator] as he came around with a sudden movement.” Then, the man turns into a street of shops, “enter[ing] shop after shop, pric[ing] nothing, sp[eaking] no word, and look[ing] at all objects with a wild and vacant stare.” Forced out into the street eventually, the man finds himself without a crowd and “[runs] with incredible swiftness through many crooked and peopleless lanes.” This pattern carries on: the old man slowing and trying to remain as long as he can with crowds; the narrator constantly trying to keep him in sight. At one point, near morning, the old

man actually gives “a half shriek of joy” to discover a gin-joint still open and spends as long as he can “stalk[ing] backward and forward, without apparent object, among the throng”; but once the bar closes, he is overtaken by “despair.”

By nightfall of the next day, the narrator finds himself “wearied unto death” and confronts the man with a stare. Paying him no notice, the man moves on past him, and the narrator gives up his pursuit, deciding:

the old man [...] is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow, for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the “Hortulus Animae,” and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that “er lasst nicht lesen” [“it does not allow itself to be read”].<sup>134</sup>

Seeming to affirm the narrator’s view of things, Benjamin writes:

To Poe, the *flâneur* was, above all, someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd; the reason why he hides in it is probably close at hand. Poe purposely blurs the difference between the asocial person and the *flâneur*. The harder a man is to find, the more suspicious he becomes.<sup>135</sup>

According to this interpretation, it seems that Benjamin gives credence to the narrator’s idea that this man is suspicious because of his activities in the crowd, that this man is continually seeking out the crowd because of some psychological impetus—guilt if he is indeed a criminal or simply some lack in his consciousness, a lack specific to modernity.

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<sup>134</sup> “The Man of the Crowd.”

<sup>135</sup> Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire,” p. 48.

Such a reading ignores the narrator's own suspicious activities, however. As a story that at least potentially belongs with Poe's examinations of different kinds of psychopathologies through what are essentially dramatic monologues, it is possible that the central interest of the story lies in the relationship—that is, the gap—between what is meant to count as objective reality and the narrator's perception. From this perspective or approach, what we see instead is a man being stalked perhaps because he has some valuables on him (the diamond the narrator thinks he has). The various details Poe gives us about the narrator, details which the narrator seems to think natural, actually expose the situation as it might be perceived by the old man. After it begins to rain, the narrator tells us: "Tying a handkerchief about my mouth, I kept on. For half an hour, the old man held his way with difficulty along the great thoroughfare; and I here walked close at his elbow through fear of losing sight of him."<sup>136</sup> Though the narrator next claims that, "never once turning his head to look back, he did not observe me,"<sup>137</sup> it is difficult to imagine that in a crowd so thick the old man would not have sensed the closeness of his pursuer, something which seems confirmed by the old man's next action—to enter another street full of pedestrians and "wal[k] more slowly and with less object."<sup>138</sup> The old man appears to be deliberately idling in hopes of staying in a crowd, true; but the need to be in a crowd becomes legible as a matter of his suspicions regarding the man who is relentlessly tailing him instead of a matter of his own nefarious aims. Also, though the narrator continues to believe that the old man has not noticed him following, the old man's actions continue to indicate that he has. He is relieved and almost overjoyed every time he finds himself sheltered by the crowd; he is horrified

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<sup>136</sup> "The Man of the Crowd."

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



and frightened every time he finds himself on a nearly deserted street with the narrator on his track, and he speeds up to traverse it as quickly as his enfeebled frame will allow.

What this story exposes is that without the crime, the two individuals in the story become mutually illegible and unknowable. Benjamin's formulation implies, uncharacteristically, that the individual remains a constant across the changing social relations of capital, and modernity appears as a set of conditions that make the individual difficult to find. "The Man of the Crowd," on the other hand, exposes modernity as a set of conditions that make the individual difficult to know. Despite the fact that the narrator keeps the old man in sight, he remains impossible to know; his person remains visible, but his motives and aims remain opaque. This, in turn, says something about crime in fiction. In the narrator's mind, the man must be criminal because he is unknowable, which is to say that in the narrator's mind, the commission of a crime would make this man knowable. Crime, then, becomes a solution to the problem of the individual and the singular. Even though it introduces the problem of the extraordinary, the person whose signs are meant to mislead, and the problem of the manipulation of signs, it also constructs a finite set of possibilities.

"The Man of the Crowd," then, illuminates Poe's actual detective stories. Almost illegible according to today's expectations of detection, Dupin's elaborate disquisitions on the faulty logic according to which the world at large reasons suggest an alternative origin for the detective story—not crime but the potentially endless proliferation of signs and systems of interpretation that characterizes a world unleashed from some of its central cosmologies. In "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," for instance, the detective work of Dupin consists wholly of a process of re-reasoning against the faulty accounts of various newspaper articles, where he continually returns to the actual facts known as a corrective to the theories propounded in the

articles. As a result, the crime, or at least the conditions of the crime, functions as the reality that limits speculation; the crime, that is, becomes the impetus for the reconstruction of reality and informs the logic by which it is reconstructed.

Crime, then, symbolically solves the problem that sleuthing, in the Holmes stories, is meant to mask: it limits reality to a set of conditions that can be experienced organically. If we cannot know in advance a set of behaviors by which the human animal can be known, then we need instead a bounded and known space whose details are known intimately enough for their disturbance to immediately register. Crime limits the problem both of knowing where to look and knowing how to look by instituting the scene of the crime as the bounded space to be read and by limiting the epistemological possibilities to the unconscious sign that inadvertently points to the criminal and the deliberately manipulated sign that is legible as arranged to point away from the criminal.

#### **1.4 THE DETECTIVE NARRATIVE AND THE PROBLEM OF ORIGINS**

The problem of origins is not just a particular issue related to the question of identifying the genre's historicity, then. Instead, the problem of origins is the historical matter out of which the detective story emerges; the problem of origins is also exactly what the detective story, in its full-fledged form, both preserves and buries. In the following chapters, I trace the process of the detective story coming into being by looking at some literary instances where appears in concrete form the historical intransigence that defines the early Victorian period in England and where recognizable detective narrative structures address that intransigence.

## 2.0 THE DETECTIVE NARRATIVE AND THE REPRODUCTION OF HISTORY IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

“Of all the mysteries that will crop up in *Bleak House*,” writes D. A. Miller, “not the least instructive concerns the curious formal torsion whereby a novel dealing with a civil suit becomes a murder mystery, and whereby the themes of power and social control are passed accordingly from the abyssal filiations of the law into the capable hands of the detective police.”<sup>139</sup> Thus he marks, to a certain extent, the peculiarity of finding genre in our Dickens, as opposed to just remarking upon the topical interest of the fact that there is a detective and a murder in the novel. Miller has his own account of why this should be so, which I will look at in due time, but for now, I’m interested not only in the importance of Miller’s realization but also in the terms in which it is presented, terms that, when examined, reveal even more of the significance for both *Bleak House* and the detective narrative of the detective narrative’s unexpected appearance in *Bleak House*’s pages.

Miller’s language—“a novel *dealing with* a civil suit” vs. “a murder mystery”—echoes a long-standing distinction between genre fiction, in the derogatory sense, and literature, one which dictates how we read each and what we read each for. It is a distinction whereby genre has form, indeed is reducible to a set of conventions, and literature has substance. It is a tacit distinction we can observe in the contemporary responses to the novels of Wilkie Collins. One

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<sup>139</sup> D. A. Miller, “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*,” *New Casebooks: Bleak House, Charles Dickens*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), pp. 92-93.

reviewer of *The Woman in White* granted “that the plot in point of intricacy [is] a masterpiece,” but concludes that it “is not a novel which evokes the better feelings of human nature.”<sup>140</sup> On the same theme, another reviewer of *The Woman in White* writes that Collins’ “plots are framed with artistic ingenuity [...],” but “he does not attempt to paint character or passion.”<sup>141</sup> “The fascination which he exercises over the reader,” this reviewer continues, “consists in this—that he is a good constructor.”<sup>142</sup>

One of the most institutionally familiar accounts of the novel, J. Hillis Miller’s “Interpretation in Dickens’ *Bleak House*,” goes so far as to present the novel’s form as distinctly a matter of content. Hillis Miller argues that *Bleak House* is a “model in little of English society in [Dickens’] time” and “an imitation in words of the culture of a city.”<sup>143</sup> According to this thesis, we must understand *Bleak House* as a novel whose method of construction is faithful copying. The reason behind such an operation, according to Hillis Miller, is that “with description goes explanation,” that in “tell[ing] how things got as they are,” what will become apparent are the “steps to take to save England before it blows up, like the springing of a mine, or catches fire, like Krook, or falls into fragments [...], or resolves into dust...”<sup>144</sup> It is a thesis that asks us to see the novel as an intact whole only in so far as it copies the whole of the world. The novel’s only shape, then, is created by the specific contours of its content.

Were this the case, we would have to consider the novel’s existence to be a piece of tragic irony because one of the things that is consistently identified as the most exhausting drain on society, the one thing that is posed as the very antithesis of progress, is precisely such

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<sup>140</sup> An “Unsigned Review” from the *Critic*, collected in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, Ed. Norman Page (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 82.

<sup>141</sup> An “Unsigned Review” from the *Saturday Review* collected in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 83.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Interpretation in Dickens’ *Bleak House*,” *Victorian Subjects* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 179.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

directionless, blind copying. Early on, when we are introduced to the Jellyby family, we are also introduced to an opposition between repetitious pseudo-activity and progress by witnessing the literal activity of copying. Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy" consists wholly in writing letters, or more to the point, in copying and sending out the same letter over and over again. In the course of her life, we are told, "she has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects, at various times, and is at present (until something else attracts her) devoted to the subject of Africa; with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry—and the natives—and the happy settlement, on the banks of the African rivers, of our superabundant home population."<sup>145</sup> It is a description that registers the primacy that the letter writing takes over the causes themselves, as well as exposing the imperial motives of such so-called philanthropy. Meanwhile, the Jellyby family is in as much disarray as the letter-writing materials themselves. Mrs. Jellyby is presented as a woman "sitting in quite a nest of waste paper,"<sup>146</sup> brooding over her own absorption in causes while her family flail around like so many lost fledglings. Peepy's head is caught between the spokes of the railing when Esther, Ada, and Richard arrive. Mr. Jellyby sits "in a corner with his head against the wall" and is unable to speak, though he "open[s] his mouth [...] as if he had something on his mind," only to "shut it again [...] without saying anything,"<sup>147</sup> his own suffering in obscurity lost to Mrs. Jellyby's philanthropic ambitions. Her copying, then, is directly linked to the prevention of new verbal production.

Most poignantly in the case of the youth in the novel, copying is opposed to the health of future generations. Caddy Jellyby is the living symbol of the destructive powers of copying. First discovered by Esther amongst the general confusion of the sitting room "strewn with papers

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<sup>145</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 35.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter,” Caddy seems just one more crumpled and discarded, failed missal: a “jaded and unhealthy-looking, though by no means plain girl, at the writing-table, who sat biting the feather of her pen,” “in such a state of ink,” while “from her tumbled hair to her pretty feet, which were disfigured with frayed and broken satin slippers trodden down at heel, she really seemed to have no article of dress upon her, from a pin upwards, that was in its proper condition or its right place.”<sup>148</sup> Caddy’s future promise, that is, is stained and stunted by copying. Meanwhile, there is the less literal copying that addles the lives of Richard Carstone and Ada Clare; despite all the warnings of their guardian, John Jarndyce, Richard cannot resist the lure of the Chancery suit and becomes yet another victim, along with the “innumerable children [who] have been born into the cause.”<sup>149</sup> His life is given over to what is just another reiteration of the same pattern that has blighted the lives of others, leaving, in the end, another widow and another fatherless child, who is only just spared becoming yet another ward of the court. Indeed, with one exception which I will discuss in relationship to the first person narration of Esther Summerson, the novel’s heroine, any form of copying, repetition, genetic duplication, etc. that the novel takes a look at counts as an impediment to society’s progress.

Even Bleak House’s central symbol of society’s stagnation—Chancery—is itself a massive copying and repetition machine. Depicting Chancery and the case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce to Esther, John Jarndyce tells us as much. He explains that the case “was about a Will when it was about anything,” but:

In the question of how the trusts under that Will are to be administered, the fortune left by the Will is squandered away; the legatees under the Will are

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-38.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

reduced to such a miserable condition that they would be sufficiently punished if they had committed an enormous crime in having money left them; and the Will itself is a dead letter. All through the deplorable cause, everything that everybody in it, except one man, knows already, is referred to that only one man who don't know it, to find out—all through the deplorable cause, everybody must have copies, over and over again, of everything that has accumulated about it in the way of cartloads of papers (or must pay for them without having them, which is the usual course, for nobody wants them); and must go down the middle and up again, through such an infernal country-dance of costs and fees and nonsense and corruption, as was never dreamed of in the wildest visions of a Witch's Sabbath. Equity sends questions to Law, Law sends questions back to Equity; Law finds it can't do this, Equity finds it can't do that; neither can so much as say it can't do anything, without this solicitor instructing and this counsel appearing for A, and that solicitor instructing, and that counsel appearing for B; and so on [...]<sup>150</sup>

And it is worth looking further into the way in which all the repetitions and diabolical ritornellos cited in this “infernal country-dance” are rooted in the peculiar practices of Chancery.

Because Equity cases were not tried by jury and did not involve the immediate examination of witnesses by word of mouth in the Court itself, but “worked only by affidavits, read aloud by counsel,”<sup>151</sup> Chancery cases took on this protracted character over the centuries. In his comprehensive *A History of English Law*, William Holdsworth offers an introductory *sketch* of Chancery procedure, which, as well as being minutely informative, in its own extensiveness also gives us a sense of how labyrinthine the system had become over the

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>151</sup> Douglas Hamer, “Dickens: The Old Court of Chancery,” *Notes and Queries* (September 1970): 343.

centuries of its existence. There is first the “pleadings” stage of a Chancery suit, which is begun when “the plaintiff” “address[es] a bill to the chancellor, praying process against the defendant to compel him to appear and put in an answer.” Such a “bill asked for relief, and required the defendant to make discovery” or to “answer to the matters stated in the bill.” For this purpose, the statements of the bill submitted by the plaintiff were framed as questions for the defendant; “the bill was then engrossed on parchment and filed with the proper officer of the court.” The next part of this particular stage involved the defendant’s response. The defendant was subpoenaed to “appear and get an office copy of the bill.” Once having read the bill, the defendant had choices for a response, he could “demur or plead or answer.” The previous two choices would require an alteration of the bill itself, thus drawing out a procedure not brief to begin with. Though an answer would, relatively speaking, get the ball rolling again, “unless the defendant lived within twenty miles of London, a special commission issued to take the answer,” which “involved office fees, charges by the London solicitor who took it out, and fees to the Commissioners for swearing.”<sup>152</sup>

Already we begin to understand how Chancery consumes so many resources in the novel, and this has only been an abbreviated version of the first stage of the proceedings. The next stage involved “the examination of witnesses.” After “interrogatories” were framed for the witnesses, “the witnesses were examined in private, none of the parties or their agents being present.” Furthermore, “it was necessary to issue a special commission to take the evidence of witnesses in the country,” which Holdsworth explains, was “a process which was at once expensive and slow.” Finally, “when all the evidence had been taken [and] published,” “the parties could get copies on payment of fees.” This made the case “ripe for a hearing” but this in

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<sup>152</sup> William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law: Volume IX* (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1944), p. 340.



turn “could be delayed by motions to suppress depositions, or to issue another commission to take further evidence.” It is also the case, that at any moment during the hearing itself, if “a question of law arose, a special case might be sent to a court of law, or the court might require the plaintiff to test his legal right by bringing an action at law.”<sup>153</sup> And throughout all of these twists and turns, because, again, all of this took place as a series of separate and sequestered operations, “every document had to be copied and re-copied, so that every one concerned in a case received one.”<sup>154</sup>

When Tom Jarndyce tells Esther that Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, while once “about a Will, and the trusts under a Will,” is “about nothing but costs now,”<sup>155</sup> he is pointing specifically to the costs of copying and circulating copies, the various fees of the law-writers who copy, like *Bleak House*’s Nemo, and the solicitors who pass the copies round and round amongst themselves, like Kenge and Carboy and the insidious Vholes. Jarndyce tells Esther, “we are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving around the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about costs.”<sup>156</sup> Note the irony, here: every one of the actions Jarndyce is naming would require documentation and further copying, thus accruing more costs and, since it is about costs now, thus also amassing more material for the case. It is the doom of this repetition machine that makes the third person narrator of the novel argue “that there is not an honourable man among [the Court’s] practitioners who would not give [...] the warning, ‘Suffer any wrong that can be done you,

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>154</sup> Hamer, p. 343.

<sup>155</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 88.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

rather than come here!’”<sup>157</sup> It is why the only escape, once one is enthralled by Chancery and caught in its repetition machine, appears to be suicide or death by exhaustion—although, occasionally in the course of the novel, someone articulates the solution that “the whole [be] blown to atoms with ten thousand hundredweight of gunpowder.”<sup>158</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Chancery never functioned properly. It seems, instead, a matter of its misfit with modernity. Just prior to its modern reconfiguration, begun with the reforms of 1852, Chancery was the Frankenstein’s monster that nearly a millennium’s worth of changes and negotiations in response to political exigencies, and the ad hoc formalizations of these, made it. Because Chancery, or the Lord Chancellor’s office, was originally attached to and dependent upon the king, there mainly for the hearing of petitions for the king’s intervention and the granting of caprices, known as “equity” or the administration of fairness, it had very little in the way of what we would call a rational or formal framework – it was, simply put, that office which expressed the king’s judgment and pleasure in response to requests for his intervention. Gradually, Chancery developed independence from the crown, becoming a permanent body in its own right, but it maintained its basic character.<sup>159</sup> For most of its history, its function was to provide relief from penalties decided in judgments in the courts of Common Law or to hear cases for which there was no effective common law. Such situations could arise because of the different natures of the system of the Common Law and the system of Equity as they developed in different directions toward the modern period.

Analyzing the history of the two and considering the question of how “law and equity come to be administered by separate courts,” Holdsworth explains that early in its history what

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>159</sup> See William S. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law, Volume I*, eds. A. L. Goodheart and H.G. Hanbury (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd. and Sweet and Maxwell, Ltd., 1982), “The Jurisdiction of the Court of Chancery and the Chancellor,” pp. 445 – 476.

became the separate courts of Common Law, which developed out of the Curia Regis (the King's Court), "was marked by two of the chief characteristics which we associate with a court of equity": "[p]roceedings were begun by a petition to the king for his interference; and that interference might result in remedies which, by reason both of their character and their methods of enforcement," may have gone contrary to normal proceedings.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, the Curia Regis out of which the Common Law grew, had so much the character of the later system of Equity that it warranted the following comparison to which Holdsworth, citing G. B. Adams, treats us, concerning the way that the Curia Regis was "as much outside of, and in violation of, the ordinary system of justice which prevailed throughout the Anglo-Norman state, as ever Equity was at any later time in relation to the Common Law system."<sup>161</sup> However, over "the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries," the "remedies" or king's interferences became rules, and these rules, "and the machinery by which they were enforced, rapidly developed and hardened into a regular system of law,"<sup>162</sup> which it then fell to Equity to mitigate. So, "the precocious fixity attained by the rules of the common law had caused the administration of equity to be handed over to a tribunal which had come to be perfectly distinct from any of the common law courts."<sup>163</sup>

By the time in which it is surmised that *Bleak House* is set, ca. 1827,<sup>164</sup> as opposed to the years of its initial serial publication in *Household Words*, 1852 – 1853, Chancery's practice was losing its special character of a court of relief. Chancery was, strictly speaking, subject to no rule of law, and cases were decided based solely on the judgment of the Lord Chancellor; however,

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<sup>160</sup> Holdsworth, *Volume I*, p. 446.

<sup>161</sup> Qtd. in Holdsworth, p. 447.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>164</sup> William S. Holdsworth, "Bleak House and the Procedure of the Court of Chancery," *Charles Dickens as a Legal Historian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), p. 81.

coming into the modern period, the Chancellors were increasingly governed by principles derived from past practices and rulings in past cases. One authority argues “that the rules of equity are not, like the rules of common law, supposed to have been established from time immemorial,” but “have been established from time to time—altered, improved, and refined from time to time.”<sup>165</sup> As such, its “doctrines are progressive, refined, and improved,” and as a living tradition of revision, he suggests, that “if we want to know what the rules of equity are, we must look [...] rather to the more modern than the more ancient cases.”<sup>166</sup> But by the end of the 17th century, principles of practice were tending toward fixed rules. Holdsworth tells us that “cases decided in the court of Chancery were beginning to be reported, and those cases were cited as authorities,” tending, as a result, to put a check on the discretion of the Chancellor.<sup>167</sup> Gradually emerging from this set of circumstances came a tension between the original nature of equity, which “depended ‘essentially upon the particular circumstances of each individual case’,”<sup>168</sup> and the demands for uniformity and accountability that marked its confrontation with modernity.

In Dickens’s depiction, it is not always clear whether it is the Lord Chancellor and all the lawyers and solicitors related to the court to blame for the mess that is Chancery and the mess that Chancery has made of London or whether it is “the system” in general, as Gridley is told.<sup>169</sup> In Holdsworth’s description of the particular Lord Chancellor, Lord Eldon, of the Chancery of 1827, though, we get insight into the dilemma that prevents Chancery from making any kind of progress. He tells us, perhaps not without irony, that “the peculiar characteristics of [Eldon’s]

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<sup>165</sup> Qtd. in Holdsworth, *A History ...*, p. 465.

<sup>166</sup> Qtd. in Holdsworth, *A History ...*, p. 465-466.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*; Holdsworth is quoting William Blackstone.

<sup>169</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 193.

mind, which led to so many delays in his court, made him peculiarly fit to settle the principles of equity”<sup>170</sup>:

He had a thorough grasp of existing rules and principles; but he looked into all the facts and circumstances of each case that came before him as if there were no such rules, and as if, therefore, he was under the necessity of determining each case as one of first impression.<sup>171</sup>

What is interesting about this description is that it is a portrait of what should be the ideal Lord Chancellor. He knows the history of the court’s cases and judgments so well as to be able to make sound judgments as if they were matters of intuition, something which speaks to the role of Chancellor as the embodiment of the living history of the court. Yet, in Dickens account, we understand the Lord Chancellor as either himself dysfunctional or, at least, powerless to intervene in the self-perpetuating repetitions of Chancery.

For D. A. Miller, in “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*,” the detective plot that emerges in the novel is a response to this apparent failure of Chancery to ever move forward or come to a conclusion but as its mediation rather than as its alternative.

If the Chancery system includes everything but settles nothing, then one way in which it differs from the detective story is that the latter is, precisely, a *story*: sufficiently selective to allow for the emergence of a narrative and properly committed, once one has emerged, to bringing it to completion. In relation to an organisation so complex that it often tempts its subjects to misunderstand it as

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<sup>170</sup> Holdsworth, *A History ...*, p. 468.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

chaos, the detective story realizes the possibility of an easily comprehensible version of order.<sup>172</sup>

Miller goes on to consider the way in which detection can get out of hand and threaten the social order. Noting the way that everyone in the book seems to catch what the Verinder's steward in *The Moonstone* calls "detective fever,"<sup>173</sup> Miller notes that even when the "amateur detectives" fail, "the project of detection enjoys a certain dangerous efficacy. For it fails in every respect except that of catching on."<sup>174</sup> And, as the number of people engaged in amateur detection increases, "detection poses a threat" to the order of society in that, "regularly involving a double transgression, of class as well as conjugal boundaries, they give scandal to the twin unities that Dickens puts at the basis of a decent social order, family and station."<sup>175</sup>

This threat, Miller argues, in turn needs to be contained, and the energies and desires that the detective story fosters also need to be contained within it—hence, he argues, "the profound necessity for the police in *Bleak House*."<sup>176</sup> Miller writes:

Though the Court of Chancery, to make itself tolerable, produces a desire for the detective story, as for that which will confer on it the legibility of a traditionally patterned meaning, this desire, far from issuing in an order that can be comfortingly proffered and consumed as the essence of the chaos that is Chancery's appearance, threatens to reduplicate such chaos in the yet more explicit form of social disaggregation. What keeps the production of this desire from being dangerously excessive—what in fact turns the dangerous excess back into profit—is that the detective story, following the same logic whereby it was

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>173</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, Ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>174</sup> Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," p. 97.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

produced among the effects of Chancery, produces among *its* effects the desire of its own authoritative version and regulatory agency.<sup>177</sup>

This regulatory agency is the police, represented in the novel by Mr. Bucket. In the end, then, while promising a solution to the problems of Chancery, the detective plot is ultimately another representation of the system. Miller concludes: “Made so desirable as a sort of institutional ‘alternative’ to Chancery, the police derive their ideological efficacy from providing, within a total system of power, *a representation of the containment of power.*”<sup>178</sup>

What Miller does not attend to in his argument, however, is the fact that Chancery is already an outmoded system by the writing of *Bleak House*, that it is the husk of a former era’s power and not a representation of official power in general. The police are attached to another system of law, the common law, with its jury trials, etc. And so, to follow out Miller’s logic, the transfer of the narrative energies from their focus on Chancery to their fruition in the “murder mystery” plot represents not a mediation of the former by the latter but a revolution or at least a usurpation. Nevertheless, in many respects, Miller offers the key to understanding the radical formal change that takes place in *Bleak House* in so far as he points out that what the detective narrative has to offer is *a narrative*. As I will argue, the deepest desire of the novel is to achieve “a progress,” some kind of clear movement forward; however, most of the novel registers, instead, the gulf that exists between the “here” of decaying feudal representations of power and right and the “there” of some idealized bourgeois future; and rescuing the novel from its register of this crisis is the detective narrative, with its special features, a structure that is only partially represented by the actual murder mystery plot.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

## 2.1 COPYING AND HISTORICAL CRISIS

For the most part, the real significance of Chancery's dysfunction and its impact on the novel has been hidden in plain view as a result of the transparency we assume characterizes the novel's form. Against this, Jonathan Arac's analysis of the novel in his "Narrative Form and Social Sense in *Bleak House* and *The French Revolution*"<sup>179</sup> offers a perspective on the novel's construction that takes us beyond the assumption that its form is dictated by its content, beyond the idea that Dickens observed the world as it was and simply copied it down. For Arac, Dickens (in company with Thomas Carlyle, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne) is a writer conscious of the need to represent his age to itself, of the need "to form the world, to shape energetic chaos."<sup>180</sup> Arac writes: "Despite working in a mode that did not enjoy high cultural prestige, [...] the novelist nonetheless possessed an extraordinary ambition, to grasp and encompass the 'whole horizon' of 'what earth is' and 'has to shew', to allow readers to experience something like the 'absolute presence of reality' in the pages of a book."<sup>181</sup> In particular, Arac writes, "Carlyle and Dickens both are trying to help the English gain the understanding of their physical, moral, and historical environments that will allow them to avoid the horrors of a revolution by avoiding the stagnation of conservatism."<sup>182</sup> Accordingly, he

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<sup>179</sup> Jonathan Arac, "Narrative Form and Social Sense in *Bleak House* and *The French Revolution*," *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 114-138.

<sup>180</sup> Arac, Introduction to *Commissioned Spirits*, p. 4.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2; the quotations are from William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the text from which Arac derives the title of his book—"Commissioned Spirits."

<sup>182</sup> Arac, "Narrative Form and Social Sense....," p. 137.



argues, “*Bleak House* portrays the passing of an old order of society and its replacement by a new,”<sup>183</sup> something which becomes apparent “in the story of Chesney Wold.” Arac writes:

In the course of the book, the Dedlock family, a distinguished line “as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable,” slips finally toward extinction [...] [The] house [...] has passed its great days and has now become the seat of deathly immobility. Yet it has brought forth new life. The housekeeper’s son Rouncewell has left home and gone north, where he becomes not an anonymous Chartist, as Sir Leicester Dedlock imagines, but an ironmaster and a politically important figure, who has been asked to stand for a seat in Parliament.<sup>184</sup>

This transition, he concludes, can be described as “the bourgeois Phoenix [being] born from the ashes of aristocratic decay,”<sup>185</sup> and it is the novel’s achievement to reproduce history as the story of such a transition.

For Arac, one of the significant innovations of mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century writing, whether of history, as in Carlyle’s work, or of the novel, is its production of what he calls “narrative overview” or the “aerial perspective” of the “commissioned spirits” capable of showing the truth of the world. Noting in *Bleak House* a significant change from earlier novels, Arac argues that its difference has largely to do with its construction of this narrative overview. He sees the third person narrator of the novel, who sets us down in the fog of London, as answering *Dombey and Son*’s narrator’s plea “for ‘a good spirit who would take the house-tops off’ and from this synoptic perspective reveal to everyone the reality of everyone else’s life.”<sup>186</sup> It is a perspective that Arac likens to “Asmodeus, the ‘Limping Devil’ of Lesage’s *Diable boiteux*” who does just

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

that only with the intention of “revea[ling ...] the moral disorder within.”<sup>187</sup> However, instead of exposing the immorality of everyone, *Bleak House*’s narrator is a “reformed Asmodeus” who can “present the interrelated lives of London in so compelling a vision as to produce social reform.”<sup>188</sup> Arac argues that “in *Bleak House* Dickens presents a narrator who consistently plays the part of this ‘good spirit’” and the perspective thereby achieved “draws together the classes of society and the different individual lives that make up the multiple plots of *Bleak House*.”<sup>189</sup> And for Arac, what the book ultimately achieves is a “panoramic unity [that] absorbs a great variety of narrative perspectives that the full worl[d] of the boo[k] combine[s] and comprehend[s] in one whole.”<sup>190</sup>

In noting what Miller elides, that the novel is concerned with the problem of representing a transition from the old order to the new, Arac’s positioning of the novel’s form offers a useful beginning; however, many aspects of the novel can be read, alternatively, as representing not a linear transition but the impossibility of getting from the aristocratic and post-feudal order to the looked-for future. For one, there is the absolute refusal of the old order to “move on.” Instead, as represented by the Dedlock family, the aristocratic order sits in society, clogging its system—the social equivalent of Sir Leicester’s gout. Indeed, the analogy is apt in so far as the narrator’s studies of the Dedlock family are patent explorations of the theories of degeneration that were also circulating at the time<sup>191</sup> and therefore indicate what happens when the same genes are passed around for too long, another instance of unhealthy copying. The Dedlock’s proper

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., Introduction to *Commissioned Spirits*, p. 17.

<sup>188</sup> Arac, “Problems of Realism in *Martin Chuzzlewit*,” *Commissioned Spirits*, p. 90.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., “Narrative Form and Social Sense...,” p. 121.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>191</sup> For discussions on how theories of degeneration appeared in and shaped 19<sup>th</sup> century social discourse and fiction, see *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, Eds. J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, culture and the novel: 1880-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

bloodlines, those legitimated ‘from time immemorial’, have run out into a shallow puddle of degeneracy and those in whose veins that blood trickles are at such a state of decrepitude that there is no real threat of their genes being exogamous. Indeed, the representative of the Dedlock’s genetic and cultural promise—Volumnia Dedlock—is synechdochically tied to petrified embryos. Dickens writes:

Miss Volumnia, displaying in early life a pretty talent for cutting ornaments out of coloured paper, and also for singing to the guitar in the Spanish tongue, and propounding French conundrums in country houses, passed twenty years of her existence between twenty and forty in a sufficiently agreeable manner. Lapsing then out of date [...] she retired to Bath; where she lives slenderly on an annual present from Sir Leicester, and whence she makes occasional resurrections in the country houses of her cousins. She has an extensive acquaintance at Bath among appalling old gentlemen [...] and is of high standing in that dreary city. But she is a little dreaded elsewhere, in consequence of an indiscreet profusion in the article of rouge, and persistency in an obsolete pearl necklace like a rosary of little bird’s-eggs.<sup>192</sup>

The last image is fully saturated with a Protestant, bourgeois attitude toward the morbidity, at once, of the aristocracy and its Royalist, Catholic history, something also propounded by the legend of the “Ghost Walk.” And the message is that no future can come from this power axis. Hung on an old and unwanted doctrine are little shells of dead potential; and Volumnia, in her own way, becomes another mummified embryo. She is a little petrified bird in the shell of her aristocratic lineage.

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<sup>192</sup> *Bleak House*, pp. 347-348.

Amongst the other Dedlocks, however, Volumnia is positively vital. The Dedlock cousins who descend upon Sir Leicester every so often are, to put it bluntly, worse than useless. Giving the aristocracy both barrels of his ironic sensibility, Dickens writes:

There is likewise the Honourable Bob Stables, who can make warm mashies with the skill of a veterinary surgeon, and is a better shot than most gamekeepers. He has been for some time particularly desirous to serve his country in a post of good emoluments, unaccompanied by any trouble or responsibility.<sup>193</sup>

Meanwhile, “the rest of the cousins” are described as:

ladies and gentlemen of various ages and capacities; the major part, amiable and sensible, and likely to have done well enough in life if they could have overcome their cousinship; as it is, they are almost all a little worsted by it, and lounge in purposeless and listless paths, and seem to be quite as much at a loss how to dispose of themselves, as anybody else can be how to dispose of them.<sup>194</sup>

The change in the last phrase, from “dispose of themselves” to “dispose of them,” makes the point that they are nothing but a drain on society’s resources. From subjects capable of managing their own livelihood and well-being, instead they have become objects, debris even, to be managed by society.

His study of the Dedlocks does not, however, lead to the conclusion that it is simply a matter of genetic degeneration. Thinking of the way “that even great men have their poor relations,” something that is true of Sir Leicester, among whose poor relations, “there are cousins so poor,” the narrator muses, “that one might almost dare to think it would have been the happier for them never to have been plated links upon the Dedlock chain of gold, but to have been made

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

of common iron at first, and done base service.”<sup>195</sup> And this sense that there are those amongst the aristocracy who could have been useful had they not been prevented from being so by their Dedlock-ed existence, communicates a complex attitude toward what we have learned to call the issue of nurture vs. nature. There is no question that the drain on society that the aristocracy represents is tied to genetic inheritance. Sir Leicester’s gout makes this connection. “Sir Leicester,” the narrator tells us, “receives the gout as a troublesome demon, but still a demon of the patrician order.” Indeed, it is likened to the invasion of his cousins, something whose presence, though a nuisance, is to be also valued as part of the distinguished inheritance of the Dedlocks. “All the Dedlocks in the direct male line [...] have had the gout.”<sup>196</sup>

Other men’s fathers may have died of the rheumatism, or may have taken base contagion from the tainted blood of the sick and vulgar, but the Dedlock family have communicated something exclusive, even to the levelling process of dying, by dying of their own family gout. It has come down, through the illustrious line, like the plate, or the pictures, of the place in Lincolnshire. It is among their dignities.<sup>197</sup>

In the connection between inheritance, disease, and unalloyed blood, we understand Dedlock’s class to own a nature that society has too long nurtured.

A so-called natural order left to feed on itself too long without intervention comprehends the entire aristocratic world. The narrator tells us of the world “In Fashion” that “there is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool [...] It is a

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air.”<sup>198</sup> Accordingly, our first introduction to Chesney Wold shows the place slowly but inexorably rotting.

The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain.<sup>199</sup>

Likewise, Mr. Tulkinghorn, the legal representative of the class’s interests, is associated with decay. When we first meet Mr. Tulkinghorn, we are told that “the old gentleman is rusty to look at.”<sup>200</sup> His rooms are characterized by “the dust” into which “all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving,”<sup>201</sup> where he thinks over “all the mysteries he knows,” secrets that are directly connected to destruction. His “mysteries” are “associated with darkening woods in the country,” i.e., Chesney Wold, “and vast blank shut-up houses in town.”<sup>202</sup> This last secret he holds, then, is directly related to a property John Jarndyce describes to Esther to show her the corrosive effects of being “in Chancery.” Of this property, which may or may not be Tom-all-Alone’s itself, he tells her:

It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the *iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust*; the chimneys sinking in; the stone steps to every door (and every

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

door might be Death's Door) turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins are propped, decaying.<sup>203</sup>

And, it is worth noting that as the rust or natural decay of untended iron, Mr. Tulkinghorn and his ilk are directly opposed to the future as represented both economically and politically in the figure of Mrs. Rouncewell's elder son, "the ironmaster." *NB:* we are also introduced to Dedlock's ineffectual cousins in the chapter entitled "The Ironmaster."

Chesney Wold, Chancery, and the sites of decay in the city, like Tom-all-Alone's, are further tied together through images of rot and parasitism in two passages which describe two seemingly opposed loci: Lincoln's Inn Hall and Tom-all-Alone's. Of Lincoln's Inn Hall, the third person narrator tells us:

Here, in a large house, formerly a house of state, lives Mr. Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now; and in those shrunken fragments of its greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts.<sup>204</sup>

And so, despite its place in the world as a realm of the respectable, it finds its double in Tom-all-Alone's, which is such a scene of destitution that the narrator is abashed at having to state that it is "in Chancery" because "it would be an insult to the discernment of any man with half an eye, to tell him so."<sup>205</sup> The narrator describes the place in more or less the same terms.

It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 89; my emphasis.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it.<sup>206</sup>

Likewise, Chesney Wold is treated as a site for the healthy to avoid. Even though its own miasmatic air does not directly infect society in the way that Tom-all-Alone's does (through smallpox), Chesney Wold carries a different threat of contamination. When Mrs. Rouncewell's industrialist son discovers his son's affection for Lady Dedlock's maid, Rosa, he insists upon removing her from Chesney Wold lest, by remaining Lady Dedlock's pet too long, she cease to be a suitable match.

In tracing these connections between the Dedlock family, Chancery, and Tom-All-Alone's, meanwhile, the novel is also indicating the source of society's deadlock. There is no logic of succession that will provide the appearance of a transition from the post-feudal order to the bourgeois. The Dedlock family and all the authorities of the old order keep their stranglehold on the present because there are no legal and social means currently available to loosen their grip. Thinking Chancery "a slow, expensive, British, constitutional kind of thing," Dedlock values it on this basis. He is sure that, "even if it should involve an occasional delay of justice and a trifling amount of confusion," it is "a something, devised in conjunction with a variety of other somethings, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-198.



speaking) of everything. And,” the third person narrator continues, “[Dedlock] is upon the whole of the fixed opinion, that to give the sanction of his countenance to any complaints respecting it, would be to encourage some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere—like Wat Tyler,”<sup>207</sup> the specter who appears to Sir Dedlock whenever social reform is mentioned. The source of Dedlock’s complacency, moreover, is that Chancery’s job is to adjudicate the transfer of property when disputes about lineage arise or the vagaries of old feudal entailments make the disposition of property uncertain; while, in so far as this is the era of the slow, quiet capitalist revolution in England, all of lineage and all of the meaning of property is in flux. Therefore, the longer society is tied up in Chancery, the longer Dedlock’s rights and privileges remain above or outside of scrutiny. With regard to this, it is worth noting that the Chancery case Dedlock is actually involved in, the dispute between himself and Boythorn, is a dispute over easement rights. In question is whether Boythorn has rights of traversal to some of Dedlock’s land because of its relationship to Boythorn’s land. And while this is not a particularly significant class and historical issue, the nature of the case, the dispute over definitions of public access and private rights was often the form in which disputes over industrial zoning appeared. This is a telling issue, moreover, in so far as it also indicates the agon between moving (forward) and sitting still, between healthy circulation and slow cessation.

Colin MacCabe offers an account of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel that illuminates *Bleak House*’s method of construction differently, providing a way to understand this agon formally. MacCabe’s analysis of the “classic realist text” disarticulates the structure of realism from a simple notion of mimesis in a way that allows us to think more deliberately about the relationship between the aspect of Bleak House that is discussed often as a faithful rendering of

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<sup>207</sup> *Bleak House*, pp. 15-16.

the world and the problem of progress. Two of MacCabe's essays on realism—"Realism: Balzac and Barthes"<sup>208</sup> and "Realism and the cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses"<sup>209</sup>—offer a way to think about realism beyond the issue of its representational capacity as a form whose defining feature is not necessarily its ability or inability to truly represent a reality that exists outside of and prior to representation. For MacCabe, debates over the issue of representational accuracy miss the real issues pertaining to Realism's ideological sway over culture. He posits that "it is only when we adopt an anti-realist epistemology that we can give a convincing account of realism."<sup>210</sup> That is, only when we do not believe that words give us immediate access to the real, can we begin to understand how the form functions. Again, MacCabe rejects any brand of "representational thesis" to define realism because such theses "always and inevitably ignor[e] the reality of [a] novel's own existence and operations." Instead, we must attend to the material existence of the text, which can be figured, in the terms of "Realism and the cinema," as a deliberate effort to see the frame of the text that purports to be a transparent window.<sup>211</sup> This attention to the materiality, or the framing, or the deliberate construction of description, is important because it allows us to investigate the ideological and historical interest that is invested in the apparently neutral description of reality.

What truly identifies the "classic realist text," in MacCabe's analysis, is the way that it *produces* its realistic effect. Its basic structure is "one in which there is a hierarchy amongst discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth."<sup>212</sup> Broken down, a Realist text contains multiple discourses, and these are presented

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<sup>208</sup> MacCabe, *Theoretical Essays: film, linguistics, literature* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 131 -150.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33 – 57.

<sup>210</sup> MacCabe, "Realism: Balzac and Barthes," p. 146.

<sup>211</sup> MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," p. 35.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

through different characters, through what they say and also what they think when we get glimpses of their consciousnesses. Each of these discourses offers a particular version of reality which is different from those versions offered by other discourses. Instead of standing each on its own—as in the Collins’s novels that are written as a set of subjective accounts of events, accounts ungoverned by a single authority, such as *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and, of course, *The Moonstone*—these discourses are placed in a relation to each other and are arranged hierarchically in relation to a real that is treated as independent of the language used to represent it. To represent this supposedly independent and verifiably empirical real there is, in MacCabe’s language, the “narrative prose.” The narrative prose, that language located outside of or above the novel, representing a disembodied narrative perspective, “functions as a metalanguage,”<sup>213</sup> a language that is “dematerialized”<sup>214</sup> and is meant to appear as the transparent medium for the expression of what really is. That is, the narrative prose is meant to be the space where language presents reality, the space in which it is assured that “the identity of things [will] shine through the window of words.”<sup>215</sup> This dematerialized language essentially translates and corrects the various discourses in the novel and gives the reader some explanation of the real reason why things should have appeared otherwise. So, in a classic realist text, it is clear from moment to moment how things stand despite how individual characters may perceive them; the narrative prose governs perspective.

One of the things worth noting about MacCabe’s analysis is that it gives us the realist text as both a structure and a process. In the finite, complete form of the book, there is a structure that can be parsed; but from the reader’s position it is a continual process of presentation and

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

correction. There is, that is, a continual movement between the details that make up the material of the novel and the whole of the world it is creating. Or, the realist structure MacCabe gives us is the very literary form of progress. In this light, we can view what Arac calls the novel's "narrative overview" differently, as a failure rather than a triumph of perspective. What marks *Bleak House*, that is, the way the narrator's perspective fails to offer clarity on the whole from moment to moment even though its desire for progress causes it to yearn for exactly this kind of clarifying perspective.

The opening words and pages of the book immediately provide a good example. The novel begins:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from the chimney-pots, making a soft drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in the mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud,

sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.<sup>216</sup>

While the first words might seem to definitively situate the reader in time and space, the syntax separates space and time, two disconnected coordinates, and obstructs the establishment of an organic reality. And from there we witness the narrative voice struggling as if in the same mud to get a purchase on some finite sense of both. Noting that “there is as much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth,” the narrator muses that “it would not be wonderful to meet a megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.” And though this image is dutifully tagged by subjunctive language that should serve to separate it from what is meant to count as real in the text, the overall effect of the passage is to present the entire urban scene as a confused image caused by the superimposition of multiple realities, like a single photo which contains multiple exposures.

This is echoed grammatically in the passage, as well. Each ‘sentence’ contains an image or images that have no grammatical connection to one another, e.g., “smoke lowering down from chimney pots” and “fog on the Kentish Heights.” Compared to grammatically complete sentences, which have movement and finite form and contribute to a hierarchization or other logical arrangement of information, these fragments hang indifferently. In MacCabe’s analysis, on the other hand, the process/structure of the realist text is one that depends upon the ethos of the sentence. It is a structure that moves forward and, like the sentence, builds upon each previous movement in such a way that alternative perceptions are not left to linger. The image of copying reality therefore appears distinct from the idea of (re-)composing reality. We picture the

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<sup>216</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 5.

former court reporter wandering the streets, jotting down as much as he can in his legal shorthand.

Accordingly, it is Walter Benjamin's consideration of the wandering subject of modernity—the flâneur—that comes mind. "Anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around," Benjamin writes, "becomes an image."<sup>217</sup> This striking claim offers a very different perspective on *Bleak House*'s apparent obsession with copying. It is in his meditation on the work of Paul Meryon, an artist who produced "engraved visions of Paris" on the eve of Baron Haussmann's restructuring, that Benjamin develops this idea. Benjamin considers Meryon's work to be a perfect copy of Paris before Haussmannization but, despite the fact that it "was finished a few years before this remodelling was undertaken,"<sup>218</sup> attributes the documentary impulse to record to a premonition of those views being lost. It isn't a matter of the artist being clairvoyant or otherwise supernaturally gifted; instead, Benjamin attributes the sense that those views could be lost to a general anticipation that "a great face-cleaning of the city was inevitable."<sup>219</sup> He writes: "It may be assumed that in its incubation period this clean-up could have at least as great an effect upon a good imagination as the work of urban renewal itself."<sup>220</sup>

The insight this brings to the nature of the mimetic image is worth exploring. Benjamin is introducing into the image three aspects where before there appeared to be only one, namely the image's factuality. There is an image's existence as a copy of whatever aspect of reality is in question. As we have seen, certain accounts of realism as a matter of content, such as Hillis Miller's, mostly attend to this aspect of an image, sketched or written. So, for instance, while

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<sup>217</sup> Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire: Modernism," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

reading *Bleak House*, a question might arise as to the accuracy, let's say, of its representation of the conditions of the urban poor or the fate of illegitimate children. The issue would be whether or not Dickens's account is true, behind which, as we've seen, lies a whole set of assumptions about the possibility of representing reality without substantial interference from the medium. In Benjamin's formulation, on the other hand, the historical meaning of the image, even could it be perfectly accurate—in Meryon's work images produced “without abandoning one cobblestone”<sup>221</sup>—lies in the invisible aspects of its production.

These invisible aspects have to do with the work of memory and anticipation. Anticipation is the important aspect to contemplate for the moment; it is the suspicion that the future will radically alter the world one perceives oneself to be living in, the suspicion that is at the bottom of the very impulse to record. And anticipation is primarily the impulse to record, to preserve in an image something that one does not expect to be around any longer. The difference has to do with how this causes us to look at the image rather than with what it makes objectively visible in the image. For instance, Benjamin writes: “the uniqueness of these pictures [lies] in the fact ‘that, although they are made directly from life, they give an impression of expired life, something that is dead or is going to die’.”<sup>222</sup> Any image ‘taken from life’, then, must be treated as a found “dialectical image.” Susan Buck-Morss defines Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image, in one instance, as:

the use of archaic images to identify what is historically new about the “nature” of commodities. The principle of construction is that of montage, whereby the

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

image's ideational elements remain unreconciled, rather than fusing into one "harmonizing perspective."<sup>223</sup>

Whereas this describes the method of producing such images, the idea can also be used as a method of reading images, a method of defamiliarizing the perspective from which things appear harmonious. This could be a matter of forcing apart, in this instance, the supposedly faithful copy of life and the historical reality which it gives us access to, not as a matter of seeing where the facts fail to match up, a negligible activity, but as a matter of seeing what ghosts haunt the image.

The mimetic image is further complicated by the work of memory in and on the image, according to Benjamin's formulation. If anticipation is the impulse to record, then memory directs the selection of what to document. To begin, the framing of vision and the selection of finite fields is a matter of the most basic and prevalent form of memory: habit. Out of the entire field of the sensible world, we see according to habitual ways of thinking and seeing. We notice certain details; we ignore, to the point of not perceiving, certain others. We subordinate some things in favor of a greater attention to others. Such, indeed, is the very matter of perception for which the detective always chides his interlocutors; and each detective has a signature way of seeing things that other characters cannot because of the force of habit. The habits that direct perception, then, reduce the visible world to a smaller set of *gestalts*. Furthermore, an artist, a writer, etc. will not document everything that her particular, historically bounded consciousness perceives; instead, she will document that which seems worth documenting out of that which she

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<sup>223</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 67; the quotation, documented in Buck-Morss's n. 33, is taken from a letter from Benjamin to Adorno, dated May 31, 1935. I say that it is one definition of the dialectical image because, as Buck-Morss explains: "The conception of the 'dialectical image' is overdetermined in Benjamin's thought," having "a logic as rich in philosophical implications as the Hegelian dialectic." And, "the unfolding of its complexities is a task of each and every chapter of" her intense study of Benjamin's arcades project"—*ibid.*



suspects will disappear. And so, an image contains in it the documenter's sense of the relevant aspects of the world. Images that are bequeathed to the future, then, cannot be read as pure presentations of the real past, even if one could be sure that they are absolutely accurate in and of themselves. Moreover, what we learn about the image that attempts to capture the present is that it is produced directly from historical uncertainty, directly from the sense that the relationship between past, present, and future is in flux and might radically alter one's sense of one's society.

It is in Friedrich Nietzsche's contemplation of "The uses and disadvantages of history for life"<sup>224</sup> that we find further insight into this somehow all-encompassing and yet motionless perspective on the present. In the essay, Nietzsche defines two modes of consciousness, the historical sense and the unhistorical sense. The latter he depicts as the condition of "cattle, grazing": "they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy or bored."<sup>225</sup> Man, Nietzsche says, envies these creatures their happiness<sup>226</sup> because he feels burdened by the historical sense and sees in their condition the image of a "lost paradise,"<sup>227</sup> while "he cannot learn to forget but clings restlessly to the past."<sup>228</sup> This inescapability of the past and of memory, Nietzsche writes, "is a matter for wonder":

a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone, nonetheless returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment.

A leaf flutters from the scroll of time, floats away—and suddenly floats back

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<sup>224</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 57-123.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

again and falls into the man's lap. Then the man says 'I remember' and envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished forever.<sup>229</sup>

This "I remember" is the essence of the historical sense and, though it brings with it melancholy, is the sense most proper to humankind, who cannot exist through the unhistorical sense.

Nevertheless, the historical sense can also overwhelm the human spirit; too much of the historical sense "is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture."<sup>230</sup> Nietzsche asks us to "imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming." The result would be that "such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming."<sup>231</sup> And thus humankind depends on the ability to forget, the ability to impose a perspective on the stream of becoming. This brings us to Nietzsche's famous prescription:

Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future—all of them depend, in the case of an individual as of a nation, on the existence of a line dividing the bright and discernible from the unilluminable and dark; on one's being just as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time; on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. This, precisely, is the proposition the reader

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

is invited to meditate upon: *the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.*<sup>232</sup>

Without this balance, the past threatens to “become the gravedigger of the present.”<sup>233</sup>

Most of what the third person narrator sees as he surveys London is almost a literal rendering of just this threat. In almost every representation of the past’s hold on the present, it is seen as a strangling grip. And, in so far as all of the past comes to be contained in Chancery, the past literally threatens to bury the present under a heap of meaningless documents not unlike Mrs. Jellyby’s letters, which threaten to smother Caddy. The rapid decay of Tom-all-Alone’s, which “desirable property is in Chancery,”<sup>234</sup> is linked directly to the past’s smothering of the present in so far as the whole structure threatens to bury its inhabitants. The narrator tells us that, “twice, lately, there has been a crash and a cloud of dust, like the springing of a mine, in Tom-all-Alone’s; and each time, a house has fallen.”<sup>235</sup>

These accidents have made a paragraph in the newspapers, and have filled a bed or two in the nearest hospital. The gaps remain, and there are not unpopular lodgings among the rubbish. As several more houses are nearly ready to go, the next crash in Tom-all-Alone’s may be expected to be a good one.<sup>236</sup>

And, though less literally, documents from the past also threaten to extinguish Esther’s hopes.

However, this problem itself is a symptom of a deeper problem into which Nietzsche is able to give us insight only indirectly. In Nietzsche’s thought, achieving a balance between remembering the parts of the past that are useful and forgetting those that threaten the stability of the present is a matter of will. He writes:

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<sup>232</sup> Nietzsche, p. 63; emphasis original.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>234</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 198.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., pp.197-198.

The stronger the innermost roots of a man's nature, the more readily will he be able to assimilate and appropriate the things of the past; and the most powerful and tremendous nature would be characterized by the fact that it would know no boundary at all at which the historical sense began to overwhelm it; it would draw to itself and incorporate into itself all the past, its own and that most foreign to it, and as it were transform it into blood. That which such a nature cannot subdue it knows how to forget; it no longer exists, the horizon is rounded and closed, and there is nothing left to suggest there are people, passions, teachings, goals lying beyond it.<sup>237</sup>

But here, the assumed interchangeability between “an individual, [...] a people, [and] a culture” breaks down. It is only in relationship to an individual that this organic metaphor is apt, and then only for the sake of argument. That is, while it is possible to discuss an individual as having a single beginning and being a single entity, though the whole legacy of Freudian thought has taught us to think otherwise, it is not accurate to discuss a culture in these terms. Instead, a culture exists by virtue of its continuous (re-)establishment of the limit at which difference becomes ‘other’ and, therefore, its continuous choosing of what to remember and what to forget.

Should this continuous representation of a culture's present existence as the natural inheritor of the past, and therefore as the indisputable owner of the future, falter significantly, what becomes apparent is the lack of the kind of definite origins that Nietzsche's organic metaphor takes for granted. In this case, the possibility (or the threat, depending on the perspective) of revolution is strong. A new society can perhaps emerge; but the character of this society is unstable. This is precisely Marx's point in the opening pages of *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire...*:

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<sup>237</sup> Nietzsche, p. 63.

the impulse of revolutionary movements to reconstruct themselves in relationship to a different past is strong, irresistible perhaps. So, when “the Revolution of 1789” literally “draped itself [...] as the Roman republic” by the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as in paintings by Jacques-Louis David, for instance, it was deliberately revising its set of ancestors and laying claim to an ancestry that pre-existed the monarchy of France and reclaiming a continuity that had been interrupted by the aristocracy, treating itself as part of a history that had been suppressed by them. And so, such breaks with the past as that represented by the French revolution are recuperated as reforms in which the revolutionary energies that sparked them are pressed into service and made to work for a progress that is only really the wave upon which the next ruling class rides into town.

In presenting the dysfunction of Chancery, Dickens is giving us access to a society that has lost its certainty of the natural continuity between past and present. What is discovered, consequently, is what Marx’s analysis clarifies and Nietzsche’s metaphor obscures, namely that the continuity between past and present is never a natural matter but always a matter of representation, the representation of a natural succession. Where representation appears as such in contradistinction to what seems to be natural to history’s inhabitants are moments when newer forms of representation fail or have not yet succeeded at annealing themselves to older forms of experience. It is producing this continuity between past, present, and future that is Chancery’s function. It does this, or should do this, by maintaining the legal transfer of rights and property, the function in which real historical continuity and the representation of historical continuity are one and the same. That Chancery cannot (re-)establish continuity is testament to the uncertainty of the transfer of power from the aristocratic order to the bourgeoisie and the attendant uneasy negotiation of identities.

This brings us back to the issue of the relationship between the third person narrative perspective and the political and ideological character of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. While, as we have seen, for Arac the third person narrative perspective achieved in the novel is of value in so far as it is able to see and divulge the connections that tie together all social milieux, given the crisis in the representation of historical continuity that we understand through Dickens's treatment of Chancery, this perspective in and of itself is of dubious value. There is, instead, another way to understand the aerial perspective that Arac has discovered. It is a perspective that comprehends the world in a way similar to Benjamin's "angel of history." In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"<sup>238</sup> Benjamin gives us a reading of a Paul Klee painting entitled, "Angelus Novus."<sup>239</sup> He writes that the painting "shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating."

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), pp. 253-264.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

The angel can see no distinction between past and present, no movement of eras, only one eternal, or at least interminable, post-lapsarian horror. And, for Benjamin, this is a vision the historian must be able to understand so that she does not fall into the trap of believing the illusion of eras, the illusion that temporal moments are distinct and finished. Benjamin writes that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”<sup>241</sup> To think otherwise is to foster more horror: e.g., “one reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.”<sup>242</sup> In *Bleak House*, what we see through the third person narrator’s eyes is piled up wreckage, except the narrator sees the same horror being repeated, echoed, and copied in every institution and topos. What the narrator sees is this inability to move forward and the same paralysis in the face of the future that it mirrors.

For Benjamin, this experience of shock or time’s freezing is the defining characteristic of revolutionary moments. Benjamin writes: “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is the characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action.”<sup>243</sup> He goes on to attribute this sensibility to an incident in Paris “during the July revolution”: “on the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places.”<sup>244</sup> Again, such a sensibility is one the historian must cultivate, learning to see history as one single catastrophe. Benjamin writes that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”<sup>245</sup> In turn, the historian “must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”<sup>246</sup> “In every era,” Benjamin writes, “the attempt

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”<sup>247</sup> However, in *Bleak House*, in so far as this perspective contains the threat of revolution, it is one that itself must be contained.

That Dickens is not in favor of a radical break with the past is evident in the ultimate solution to Chancery’s dysfunction. Throughout the text, there are occasional articulations of a more revolutionary approach to the problems of Chancery. In the first chapter, the narrator, seeing that “the empty court is locked up,” muses: “If all the injustice it has committed, and all the misery it has caused, could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre—why so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce!”<sup>248</sup> Less cautiously, Mr. Boythorn, a friend of John Jarndyce’s whose dispute with the Dedlock’s over an easement issue is in Chancery, suggests:

‘Nothing but a mine below it on a busy day in term time, with all its records, rules, and precedents collected in it, and every functionary belonging to it also, high and low, upward and downward, from its son the Accountant-General to its father the Devil, and the whole blown to atoms with a ten thousand hundredweight of gunpowder, would reform it in the least!’<sup>249</sup>

But in so far as Krook’s spontaneous combustion and Mr. Tulkinghorn’s murder are like small scale pyrotechnician’s models of Chancery coming to a sudden and violent end, their consequences augur a destructive result for society in general if Chancery itself were to be destroyed. If one pictures, as Boythorn imagines, a mine below Chancery, blowing it up on a busy day in term time, what comes with that picture are documents, however charred and only

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>248</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 10.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 108.



half-meaningful, getting loose, floating away, and like the leaves of time in Nietzsche's image, floating back to disturb the peace by floating into the wrong lap, for instance, a Smallweed lap, at the wrong time. This is borne out in both Krook's and Tulkinghorn's deaths: after each, documents that are more damaging than helpful, especially as concerns Lady Dedlock and Esther, get loose and fall into mercenary hands.

And so, instead of dealing head on with the destruction of Chancery, the novel favors its avoidance. Chancery, its power, and its effects must be contained through its treatment by the present generation as an outmoded institution of the past. Another way of establishing someone's true identity, as well as another notion of true identity must be discovered.

## **2.2 MYSTERY AS ORIGIN**

While the third person narrator can only amass information about the present, glimpsing its inextricability from the past and from a string of endless catastrophes, it is Esther who manages to thread her way through the world and achieve the deepest political desire that emerges in the text, namely, "A Progress." Between the title of Esther's first chapter and its first sentence, the entire problem of the novel is encapsulated. "A Progress" evokes exactly the desire of the novel to get on, rather than just to "move on," as Jo, the crossing-sweeper, is relentlessly enjoined to do. And just as the novel has a hard time finding a place from whence to start the future without being lured by the past's false promise to solve all present concerns and dictate the future (as exemplified in Chancery's irresistible pull on Richard), Esther has "a great deal of difficulty in

beginning to write her portion of these pages.”<sup>250</sup> Yet, Esther, and the novel in so far as it is ended with Esther’s last chapter, does manage to get on from where she was, orphaned and alone, to where she dared not admit to herself she wanted to be, married to Allan Woodcourt and at the center of her own household and community, even though the problem of how to get from here to there, from the start of her lonely and miserable life to her happy maturity, would have seemed to be insoluble. And, perhaps, to echo D. A. Miller, an equally “instructive” mystery is the mystery of how it is that a girl with no money and no family, a girl whose situation is different from other orphans only, apparently, by chance, a girl who is illegitimate, no less, can manage to make progress to the point of symbolically inheriting the world? Again, this is a mystery; but it is a mystery that must be solved because it is also a clue to the way out of the historical dilemma that is written into *Bleak House*, and ultimately a clue to the historical secrets encrypted in the detective narrative.

The key to reading the function of Esther’s story in the novel is to recognize that Esther, not despite but because she is (thought to be) an orphan, is a representative of the bourgeoisie. For one, the very nature of the progress she makes is expressive of the values of the bourgeois order. Her home, little Bleak House, lies in the northern country-side, in Yorkshire, a location of which we only get pastoral descriptions even though it is the region of the industrial future—as if Dickens has “purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of “*capitalist* things.”<sup>251</sup> Her place in society is a matter of (her husband’s) profession. Moreover, she gains this home, this family, and this place by earning it and not by being born into it. Indeed, almost the entirety of Esther’s narrative is the story of how she earned this happy ending. The formative moment of Esther’s childhood, after she has learned of her illegitimate birth, is her resolution to “try, as hard as ever

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>251</sup> *Bleak House*, “Preface,” p. 4.

[she] could, to repair the fault [she] had been born with [...], and [to] strive as [she] grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to [her]self if [she] could.”<sup>252</sup> And bring herself up in such a way she does, from her earliest success at the girls’ school to the close of her story. As if confirming her success at “repairing” her illegitimacy, she even earns the affection of Allan Woodcourt’s mother. Explaining that he “would not have [Esther] admitted on sufferance into the line of Morgan ap Kerrig” (Dickens’s fanciful fabrication of nationalist and aristocratic prejudice), Jarndyce tells Esther that it was he who invited Mrs. Woodcourt to stay with them so that she could judge Esther’s merit “against her pedigree” and decide “what is the true legitimacy.”<sup>253</sup>

And while Esther’s success may seem natural in so far as it represents the triumph of personal attributes, those of virtue, kindness, and self-reliance, over the impersonal system, looked at carefully her success is fairly radical: she is an illegitimate child who manages to inherit the world. Looked at carefully, moreover, the story of Esther’s progress is one in which a complex series of exchanges is mystified by the rhetoric of exceptionality. It would be too simplistic a reading to suggest that Esther is accepted into respectable society solely because her own personal goodness somehow outshines and outweighs her illegitimacy. When she marries Woodcourt, she comes to the marriage with property, a dowry, and even a trousseau, but she gains these by being the fiancée of John Jarndyce. And though the novel does not suggest that she “earned” these in the old-fashioned way, the fact remains that these trappings of middle class and aristocratic marriage come to her through her attempt to please John Jarndyce. Upon receiving two hundred pounds from Jarndyce for her trousseau, she tells us that she made her “preparations” while “regulating [her] purchases by [her] guardian’s tastes, which [she] knew

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<sup>252</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 20.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 752-753.

very well.”<sup>254</sup> She continues: “I arranged my wardrobe to please him, and hoped that I should be highly successful.”<sup>255</sup> In many ways, that is, Esther is an unwitting (or cagier) Becky Sharp. And in a larger sense, the key to the mystery of Esther’s success, and the key to the bourgeoisie’s gain of a position in the world which appears to be legitimate, lies precisely in the way that the structure of her narrative mystifies these transactions and her illegitimacy.

Perhaps the most initially mysterious part of Esther’s success is that her story repeats the historical crisis that the novel presents instead of exemplifying a radically different procedure. Without proper origins, she has no obvious foundation upon which to build a new life; and just as the loss of (a sense of) origins results in a compulsion to copy and repeat in Chancery and in the activity of the third person narrator, Esther is the fleshly embodiment of copying. Various things that we learn from Esther’s introduction of herself appear in retrospect to be copies of her mother’s life. Esther’s relationship with her doll, who has “a beautiful complexion and rosy lips” and who seems to exist only to contain Esther’s thoughts and secrets<sup>256</sup> will be echoed later by Esther’s own mother’s relationship with Esther and Esther’s substitute, Rosa, who is often presented by the narrator as having “fresh bright cheeks”<sup>257</sup> or some other echo of Esther’s doll. Likewise, Esther’s burial of her doll before beginning *her* new life<sup>258</sup> is a pantomime of Lady Dedlock’s transition to her new life. Esther’s mother was told that her daughter was dead; and while it is not her fault that she did not know, it is as if the shame must rest somewhere, and so Esther feels “half ashamed to tell”<sup>259</sup> of burying her doll. The shame exposes itself in the copy, which is the most prominent way in which Esther is a copy of her mother. She is not only the

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 748.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

genetic duplication of her mother; she is also the spitting image, something which first reveals itself to Mr. Guppy when he sees the other reproduction of Lady Dedlock's image in Tony Jobling's *Galaxy Gallery of British Beauties*.<sup>260</sup> And so, the multifarious doublings that are created between Esther, her mother, Esther's doll, and Rosa—not to mention all those created in the moments when Esther is mistaken for her mother and so on—create another inescapable circuit like the infernal repetition machine that is Chancery. But the key to the way in which Esther is able to move from a beginning that is no beginning at all to a significantly different place in life, despite this endless circuit of repetitions, lies in the copy that is hidden in plain view: her own narrative.

Where the novel's third person narrator cannot find a way out of the problem of where to begin and cannot achieve the kind of formal progress that characterizes the realist novel, Esther's narrative does provide a formal solution that can be discussed usefully in juxtaposition with MacCabe's "classic realist text." What we have not yet discussed is the way in which the structure MacCabe analyzes as that of the realist novel is a structure of repetition. Again, according to MacCabe, the realist text is a formal structure or a process in which a particular, embodied perspective on the world is presented and then corrected through the dematerialized and disembodied narrative prose. MacCabe explains further: "the metalanguage reduces the object languages into a simple division between form and content and extracts the meaningful content from the useless form."<sup>261</sup> Were we to understand this from a philosophically and critically realist perspective, we would say that the novel offers one character's skewed perception of reality and then provides as objective a presentation of reality as it can to correct this perspective. However, to adopt an anti-realist perspective on this form is to see a very

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>261</sup> MacCabe, "Realism and the cinema," p. 36.

different process. Instead of beginning with the idea that the material being presented existed prior to its first presentation in, what MacCabe calls, “the object language”—or, after Gilles Deleuze, instead of imagining that what is being “described” is “independent of the description” given of it<sup>262</sup>—then the first presentation of the object or scene or situation *is* the material of the narrative prose’s presentation of it rather than being just the obfuscating form the narrative prose has to ‘see through’ to get to the so-called real content. That is, instead of getting at the truth “content” behind the object language’s presentation, the narrative prose or the metalanguage *copies* but alters that which has been presented in the object language. Or, instead of subtracting the form of the object language’s presentation to get back to the ‘original reality’, the metalanguage adds another presentation. The nature of the repetition is special, however, because of its rejection of the first presentation. The repetition is a presentation that *adds* to the first presentation another presentation, but it does so by *appearing to subtract*. That is, it sets up the first presentation as an excessive and embellished, and therefore, irrational version of the truth and purports to offer a more rational account by offering *less* of an account.<sup>263</sup>

While, as we have seen, this work is not done by the third person narrator in *Bleak House*, even though, as Arac has shown, the third person narrator does achieve a unifying aerial perspective that is near to being disembodied or removed from material form, there is an alternative version of the realist narrative structure in Dickens’s work that does characterize Esther’s narrative. What MacCabe analyzes as the stabilizing and clarifying work of the metalanguage, and what I have been suggesting is absent or, at least, incompletely there in *Bleak House*, is interestingly taken over by Dickens’s first person narrators. A brief look at some

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<sup>262</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “The powers of the false,” *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 126.

<sup>263</sup> Deleuze offers a full analysis, derived in part from Henri Bergson’s theories of memory, of this apparatus as it pertains to consciousness and what he calls the “cinema of the action-image.”

moments in *David Copperfield* will demonstrate this. David Copperfield the older, the narrator whose growth as a writer is the subject of this *kunstlerroman*, begins *The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger* at what is almost an impossible beginning for a first person narrator. He writes: “To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I am born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.”<sup>264</sup> In this are intermingled two registers of the realist text. One of the discourses of the novel and the work of the metalanguage are both being performed by the same voice. The facts—that David Copperfield was born and that he was born at midnight on a Friday—would normally be conveyed in the disembodied narrative prose in MacCabe’s schema. Meanwhile, the minor discourses of the characters which convey perceptions that are only more or less correct in relationship to the narrative prose in a classic realist text would be clearly differentiated from the kind of knowledge upon which the reader can rely.

In this novel, however, the first person narration achieves a balance between limited perception and empirically verifiable reality. As one, albeit the main, character, David Copperfield should bear a perspective that is dubious, however marginally so. But, of course, he does not. When we read *David Copperfield*, we trust the knowledge of the older David, the narrator, much as we would trust the narrator of a classic realist text. Such reliability is demonstrated in the parenthetical aside—“as I have been informed and believe”—and in the sentence which reiterates that he was born at midnight: “it was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.” What these do is establish the older David as one who has researched his own life as if it were an alien subject and as one who has overcome

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<sup>264</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Jerome Buckley (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1990), p. 9.

precisely those limits of perspective that are the lot of the characters in a classic realist text. At the same moment when the older David is establishing his authority to speak about his own life, he is instituting a definite separation between himself and the younger David almost as effectively as if the novel had begun: "*He* was born."<sup>265</sup> So, strictly speaking, it is not one but two voices that comprise this text, both with the name David Copperfield.

This somewhat reproduces the structure of the realist text as it is analyzed by MacCabe, but with a difference. Between the younger David and the older, between the main character of the story and its writer, there is a similar movement to establish a limited perspective, to show the world through one character's eyes, and then to correct it through the narrative prose. A good example is the scene in which young David goes on a short trip with his soon-to-be-stepfather, the grimly named Mr. Murdstone. They stop into a hotel and encounter two rough types whom David the younger calls "gentlemen," something that gives us our first clue that the sense of this passage is going to be constructed around young David's misperceptions. The following exchange takes place:

"And who's this shaver?" said one of the gentlemen, taking hold of me.

"That's Davy," returned Mr. Murdstone.

"Davy who?" said the gentleman. "Jones?"

"Copperfield," said Mr. Murdstone.

"What! Bewitching Mrs. Copperfield's incumbrance?" cried the gentleman. "The pretty little widow?"

"Quinion," said Mr. Murdstone, "take care, if you please. Somebody's sharp."

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<sup>265</sup> The chapter title is "I Am Born."



“Who is?” asked the gentleman, laughing.

I looked up, quickly; being curious to know.

“Only Brooks of Sheffield,” said Mr. Murdstone.

I was quite relieved to find it was only Brooks of Sheffield; for, at first, I really thought it was I.

There seemed to be something very comical in the reputation of Mr. Brooks of Sheffield, for both the gentlemen laughed heartily when he was mentioned, and Mr. Murdstone was a good deal amused also.<sup>266</sup>

The ruse goes on slightly longer, ending when they get David to toast with them, ““Confusion to Brooks of Sheffield!””<sup>267</sup> Again, we are able to identify what is going on in this passage because the older David Copperfield is writing it in such a way that description and reportage are out of sorts with the young David’s reactions and thoughts about the situation and events, a juxtaposition that assures us of the older David’s narrative authority; and, through his ascendance to that authority, David also conquers his patriarchal competition, Murdstone.

This ironic juxtaposition is also present at the beginning of Esther’s narrative. “For I know I am not clever,” Esther adds by way of explaining her “difficulty in beginning to write;”<sup>268</sup> but far from being proven true, Esther’s claim that she is “not clever,”<sup>269</sup> becomes a way to expose her godmother/aunt’s cruelty. As Esther, in an apparently ingenuous mode, tells of how her godmother was so good that she always ended up making Esther feel so bad, Dickens’s and Esther’s irony establishes the opposite truth. Esther tells us:

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<sup>266</sup> *David Copperfield*, p. 27.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>268</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 17.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday [...] She was always very grave, and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her – no, could never even love her as I wished.<sup>270</sup>

Not clever, indeed. As in the older David's account of his younger self's brief tenure as Brooks of Sheffield, Esther's wide-eyed account of her godmother's "goodness" establishes the truth of her godmother's character as the content that underlies her own excessively self-abrogative perspective.

It is in how these first person narratives differ from the realist text that we discover the way in which it answers the problem of the (il)legitimate origins of the bourgeoisie. The structure of the realist novel, as MacCabe analyzes it, is a formal response to a political reality—the need to establish a coherent perspective through which the multiple signs of the new, capitalist world can be read, judged, and arranged into a system. The ironic relationship between the first person narrators' faithful recording of past events and situations which they only imperfectly understood and their own original responses or understandings of these events and situations achieves what is a similar cohesion of perspective to that of the realistic narrative structure. However, unlike the realist text in which the cohesion of perspective is maintained regularly through the alternation between the object languages and the narrative prose, these first person narratives depend upon the deferral of some fundamental truths. In each, some *mystery* or some investigation functions as the beginning. In *David Copperfield*, it is the question that

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

begins the novel. David, the narrator, sets up the following query: “whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.”<sup>271</sup> And it is through this question that we learn to perceive the various other characters in David’s life. Though I cannot carry out a full scale analysis of the way this question works to sustain a critical distance in relationship to the senses of reality given through the perceptions of other characters in the book, the significant thing to note, for my purposes, is that this question establishes David as the center of the universe (a function of the bildungs- or kunstlerroman that James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* deliberately parodies<sup>272</sup>). That is, the more we read from this perspective the more we add to the stability of the narrator’s, David’s, perspective—the question that begins the narrative invites us to help construct the stable perspective.

In Esther’s narrative, the question that compels us is not located in a single sentence but pervades almost every exchange between herself and her godmother, who turns out to be her own mother’s sister; it is a much more basic question than the question of character that opens *David Copperfield*; it is a more fundamental question of identity. The question is, who is Esther Summerson? But the question is also: where does Esther Summerson come from? This is not, however, the form in which the question Esther seems to have pursued for much of her life appears (in as much as she reveals her own true motivations). Instead, for Esther the mystery of

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<sup>271</sup> *David Copperfield*, p. 9.

<sup>272</sup> On the flyleaf of his geography primer, Stephen has written:

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*  
*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe*

James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), p. 12.

her life is her difference from others. Esther, unlike David, does not have a definite absence through which to understand her life. While David has a “shadowy remembrance [...] of [his] first childish associations with his [father’s] white grave-stone in the churchyard,”<sup>273</sup> Esther has only confusion. She “had never heard [her] mama spoken of,” yet “she had never worn a black frock” and “had never been shown [her] mama’s grave.”<sup>274</sup> And the young Esther intuits that this has something to do with what “seemed to be some other separation between” her and her schoolmates.<sup>275</sup> She tells us that “there were holidays at school on other birthdays—none on mine.”<sup>276</sup> And soon she will be told, in a fit of her godmother’s rage: “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers.”<sup>277</sup> And then, her godmother pronounces the words that Esther will live by: “Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart.”<sup>278</sup>

By the time we have finished reading the novel, we know that Esther’s godmother is referring to Esther’s illegitimacy. To say she had not been “born [...] in common sinfulness and wrath” is uncharacteristically euphemistic on her godmother’s part in so far as it means that she was born in extraordinary sinfulness; but this is Esther reporting what her godmother has said to her. What is thus interesting about the scene is the way in which it reveals very little, even though when it is told to us Esther knows what it means, knows the circumstances of her birth, and knows that her mother is Lady Dedlock. In retrospect, we understand what all these pronouncements mean, but the words themselves are ambiguous. What emerges more clearly

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<sup>273</sup> *David Copperfield*, p. 10.

<sup>274</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 18.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

than anything else is the idea that Esther is special, “set apart,” not like all the other girls. The actual language does not make it completely clear whether her being special is positive or negative. Her godmother clearly thinks it is negative, but the language itself is not very different from the language used to describe MacBeth’s birth or Christ’s, for that matter.

It is this ambiguity that constitutes the possibility for Esther’s narrative. In place of the fact that Esther is the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock, something which would make her twice cursed, as essentially an orphan and as a bastard member of the aristocracy, in which milieu her value could only be severely discounted, the *mystery* of Esther’s origins enables her to present herself on her own terms, unidentified by past forms of identification; however, this is only because her origins are presented as a mystery. Her narrative stops short of a Protean self-authoring because it is presented as the story of her search for and discovery of her true identity. Like *David Copperfield* and so many other of Dickens’s novels, this narrative appears to be the story of a character coming into a nature or an identity, as of an inheritance, that has been hidden from that character and from others; but in Esther’s narrative, the relationship between her origins, her true identity, and her fate is so far attenuated that the question of her origins becomes a “macguffin,” a term that denotes, in Hitchcock’s films, the empty premise upon which the circulation of the fiction is supposedly based.

And this is the very nature of the structure of mystery. Mystery always begins by giving a concrete but deferred character to absence. The corpse at the center of the village square, the scene of the crime, the missing possession, the broken window, etc. are all treated, in mystery, as traces of a beginning that is inaccessible. The rest of any mystery story purportedly exists to uncover and get back to that absent beginning. However, the reality of the structure is that the narrative proceeds from a lack of origin, forward into the unknown, but its procession is such

that the narrative strand that is actually going forward appears to be going backward at the same time, the narrative produces its own double and treats all that is presented for the first time as a doubling or repetition of what has already happened. It does this all the while moving toward an original presentation that comes at the end. The one bit of content of a mystery that is not a repetition comes at the end, it is the discovery of the truth, broadly put of ‘whodunit’ or what was done. This is to say that the origin of the mystery story is always at the end.

Esther’s narrative, therefore, escapes the limited confines of the problem of how to get from a stagnant here to a there, from the defunct system of adjudicating identities and rights to the there of a bourgeois utopia. It does so because it is a special kind of repetition, a repetition which only appears to be repetition while actually introducing something that did not exist—something different from all those apparently new attempts to make a progress that only fail and become actual repetitions (like all those people who enter Chancery willingly).

### **2.3 THE DETECTIVE NARRATIVE AND THE REPRODUCTION OF HISTORY**

At the beginning of the murder mystery plot in *Bleak House*, we get what we would now consider to be a classic detective story beginning. In a passage whose rhythm we will experience over and over again in countless detective stories, the detective plot is initiated after a long, gradual exposition of what is only, at the last, revealed to be a disturbance in the normal disposition of everyday life. We are first treated to a lengthy meditation on the “very quiet night,” where nothing is amiss, indeed where everything is settled into its customary monotony, a meditation which ends, fittingly, with the description of every “noise [...] merg[ing] [...] into a

distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating.”<sup>279</sup> Then suddenly, the harmonious stasis of the scene is interrupted, as the narrator is interrupted, by a noise that causes him to start, asking: “What’s that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?”<sup>280</sup> This is a brief disturbance, however, and soon “the fine night, the bright large moon, and multitudes of stars, are left at peace again.”<sup>281</sup> And soon, after wondering briefly—“has Mr. Tulkinghorn been disturbed?”<sup>282</sup>—the narrator seemingly slips back into contemplation of the nighttime tableau, thinking of all the things that have not changed since time immemorial. “But, a little after the coming of the day, come people to clean the rooms,” and the narrator is roused out of his contemplation on how things have remained the same. He notes that “either the Roman [the painting on Tulkinghorn’s ceiling] has some new meaning in him, not expressed before, or the foremost of them goes wild; for, looking up at his outstretched hand, and looking down at what is below it, that person shrieks and flies.” Likewise, “the others, looking in as the first one looked, shriek and fly too, and there is an alarm in the street.”<sup>283</sup> And eventually, the suspense is lifted and we are allowed to understand that the cause of the disturbance is the discovery of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s dead body, found “lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart.”<sup>284</sup>

It is a single tableau that comprehends pretty fairly the premise of quite a number of detective stories and novels. The world, carefully constructed as normal and even idyllic, is poised, frozen with shock as it is forced to take in the darker side of life; it is driven temporarily mad through this realization, and every social relation, every trust, and every assumption is thrown into chaos by the presence of a corpse, while all eyes look to the detective, some warily

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<sup>279</sup> *Bleak House*, p. 584.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 584-585.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 585.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 587.

to be sure, to put things right again, to re-organize reality so that it makes sense. In the typical detective story, however, we do not actually see the “before.” As a result, many critical accounts of the genre understand its symbolic function to be a restoration of order and a return to the status quo (minus one victim and one perpetrator of crime). Though as far as it goes, this is not wrong, in so far as such readings are produced within the limits of the genre isolated from its origins, the real historical and ideological significance of the form is obscured. Between the covers of the typical detective novel, we have the repetition of the proposition of a natural continuity of the development of life that is interrupted by the crime, the investigation that supposedly fills in the missing pieces of that interrupted story, and the promise of the natural order of life carrying on once the back cover is closed. Through its emergence in *Bleak House*, with its interruption or intervention in the formal character of the novel, however, we get a view of this structure whereby the crime that ‘interrupts’ becomes the occasion for a reconstruction and reformation of society.

What the detective novel’s beginning-at-the-beginning illusion obscures is precisely the problem of beginning at the beginning. The problem of what is to count as an origin that underlies *Bleak House*’s formal dilemma is solved by a form of interruption that has the capacity to erase its break with the past. Consider Mr. Bucket’s entry into the novel. One moment he is not a character in the novel, and the next moment he is just there. The scene is narrated through Mr. Snagsby eyes: Thinking he is alone with Mr. Tulkinghorn, Mr. Snagsby, “on coming to the end of his narrative, [...] gives a great start, and breaks off with – ‘Dear me, sir, I wasn’t aware there was any other gentleman present!’” And as we read on, we gather that this is not a simple matter of Mr. Bucket sneaking up on Mr. Snagsby from out of the shadows.



Mr. Snagsby is dismayed to see, standing with an attentive face between himself and the lawyer, at a little distance from the table, a person with a hat and stick in his hands, who was not there when he himself came in, and has not since entered by the door or by either of the windows. There is a press in the room, but its hinges have not creaked, nor has a step been audible upon the floor. Yet this third person stands there, with his attentive face, and his hat and stick in his hands, a composed and quiet listener. He is a stoutly built steady-looking, sharp-eyed man in black, of about the middle age.<sup>285</sup>

The scene reads almost as the equal and opposite of Mr. Krook's infamous disappearance; just as Mr. Krook spontaneously combusts, Mr. Bucket seems to have spontaneously generated within the scene in Tulkinghorn's rooms, and his appearance has the same hint of cataclysm about it.

Mr. Bucket does not arrive by natural and discernible means; the text is clear, relatively speaking, on this point: he "was not there when [Mr. Snagsby] himself came in, and has not since entered by the door or by either of the windows." Yet he is substantiated because the truth of what is going on is suspended between Snagsby's consciousness and that of the narrator's in an interesting way. This spontaneous generation, while not actually satisfactorily explained, appears *able to be explained* logically because the perception of what is going on is partially filtered through Snagsby's limited consciousness. Mr. Snagsby cannot come up with any satisfactory explanation of how it is that Mr. Bucket comes to be there, and while the narrating consciousness never gives us any clue by which the mystery could be dissolved, it also does not confirm Snagsby's point of view. That is, Mr. Bucket's appearance is suspended between

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<sup>285</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, eds. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 275.

Snagsby's confusion and the narration's silence, remaining a mystery to be solved, a mystery that never is solved, and for good reason.

Instead, Mr. Bucket's ghostliness is made substantial through repetition. At first, Snagsby sees, "standing with *an* attentive face [...] a person with hat and stick in his hands [...]," a vision that "dismays" him or upsets his sense of reality; but, as he goes over in his mind the impossibility of this apparition being material, Mr. Bucket becomes "this third person [who] stands there, with *his* attentive face, and *his* hat and stick in *his* hands, and *his* hands behind him," etc.<sup>286</sup> The subtle shift from the first description to the repetition in which there are more possessive pronouns is an important trace of this rhetorical operation because it alters the nature of the image from a loose confederation of details to a set of centralized attributes *belonging* to someone. As a result *of this repetition*, Snagsby convinces himself of the reality of Mr. Bucket's existence despite the impossibility of his appearance. The trace of this happening is reconfigured as the sublime objectivity of Mr. Bucket's very image—it is that which cannot be seen but which, precisely because of this, introduces the idea of the invisible but true meaning behind someone's appearance. We are told: "Except that he looks at Mr. Snagsby as if he were going to take his portrait, there is nothing remarkable about him at first sight but his ghostly manner of appearing."<sup>287</sup> It is not until this final moment that Mr. Bucket is actually introduced to us. Mr. Tulkinghorn puts all questions as to Bucket's origins to rest when he says, "'Don't mind this gentleman [...]. This is only Mr. Bucket.'"<sup>288</sup> Mr. Tulkinghorn, that is, authenticates the apparition by giving it a name. As in Esther's narrative, mystery itself functions as an origin.

This is also echoed in the scene of the discovery of Mr. Tulkinghorn's body.

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid; my emphasis.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

There is whispering and wandering all day, strict search of every corner, careful tracing of steps, and careful noting of the disposition of every article of furniture. All eyes look up at the Roman, and all voices murmur, “If only he could tell what he saw!”

He is pointing at a table, with a bottle (nearly full of wine) and a glass upon it, and two candles that were blown out suddenly, soon after being lighted. He is pointing at an empty chair, and at a stain upon the ground before it that might be almost covered with a hand. These objects lie directly within his range. An excited imagination might suppose that there was something in them so terrific, as to drive the rest of the composition, not only the attendant big-legged boys, but the clouds and flowers and pillars too—in short the very body and soul of Allegory, and all the brains it has—stark mad. It happens surely, that every one who comes into the darkened room and looks at these things, looks up at the Roman, and that he is invested in all eyes with mystery and awe, as if he were a paralyzed dumb witness.

So it shall happen surely, through many years to come, that ghostly stories shall be told of the stain upon the floor, so easy to be covered, so hard to be got out; and that the Roman, pointing from the ceiling, shall point, so long as dust and damp and spiders spare him, with far greater significance than he ever had in Mr. Tulkinghorn’s time, and with a deadly meaning. For, Mr. Tulkinghorn’s time is over for evermore; and the Roman pointed helplessly at him from night to morning lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 585-587.

The key here is significance that Allegory gains at the initiation of the mystery.

In his article, “‘A Paralyzed Dumb Witness’: Allegory in *Bleak House*,”<sup>290</sup> Jeremy Tambling reads this passage as evidence that “the sign and signifier have for ever come apart”<sup>291</sup> and, therefore, as further evidence of Dickens’ resistance to the illusions of realism’s ability to fix and represent reality. For Tambling, allegory, or the mode of writing that acknowledges “otherness” and is built upon that acknowledgement, is the way in which Dickens resists “the surveillance and control of modernity”<sup>292</sup>—allegory becomes the specter that haunts any possibility of fixed meaning, aligned by Tambling with madness, fragmentation, and dreams. But because Tambling is not discussing the novel’s form in detail, he misses the significance of the position of the painting in Tulkinghorn’s rooms, known as Allegory, as the link between the ineluctable repetitions of defunct systems, recorded by the stunned third person narrator, and the detective plot.

First it is necessary to think about what a *picture of Allegory* might mean. In his reading of its significance, Tambling focuses on the illustration that originally accompanied the text where the painting of Allegory points to the space from where Mr. Tulkinghorn’s dead body has been removed and reads this as the emptying out of the sign system; it is a picture of the Roman in the allegory looking down at something missing: at the lack of a signified.”<sup>293</sup> But the play of the relationships between presence and absence becomes much more complex when we

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<sup>290</sup> Jeremy Tambling, “‘A Paralyzed Dumb Witness’: Allegory in *Bleak House*,” *Dickens, Violence, and the Modern State: Dreams of the Scaffold* (London: MacMillan Press, 1995), pp. 71-97; I should point out that Tambling reads many of the same themes—questions of meaning in relationship to narrative, the struggle of the third person narrator to represent reality cohesively, and so on—and texts—Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and his essays on Charles Baudelaire and Marx’s work—in relationship to *Bleak House*; however, our positioning of *Bleak House* in relationship to them are different enough, without being diametrically opposed. To answer Tambling on every point, however, would take this essay into an overlong digression, so I will confine myself to discussing his interpretation of this particular passage in *Bleak House*.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

recognize the quality of nonsense that a picture of Allegory already has. Unlike an allegorical picture, such as the more or less contemporary *Liberty Leading the People* by Delacroix, in which, *pace* Tambling, the abstract concept of liberty is made tangible and relatively fixed through its allegorical representation, a picture of Allegory empties out allegorical structures of meaning. Allegory cannot be represented as such, though there can be instances of allegory. And so, an allegorical picture of Allegory is not simply an evacuated representation of meaning but an emblem for an ineluctable circuit of re-signification.

The fact that the picture of “the Roman” on Tulkinghorn’s ceiling is already a depiction of signification without reference, then, changes the nature of the pointing gesture and the blank space to which it points. If the function of allegory is to point to another situation or narrative or idea and, in the gesture, in the relationship created between the actual depiction and its reference, contrary to Tambling’s theory, to render the abstract tangible and limit interpretation, then the depiction of Allegory is a depiction of only the principle of referentiality. In this case, the picture on Tulkinghorn’s ceiling is an emblem for Chancery and for the loss of society’s ability to fix meaning, to stop the repetitions that have come unanchored from any linear, narrative purpose. Allegory itself can only point and never signify. However, the moment that Tulkinghorn is murdered, “the Roman, pointing from the ceiling, shall point [...] with far greater significance than he ever had in Tulkinghorn’s time” precisely because, though it may seem paradoxical, the endless circuit of re-signification has been arrested by mystery. Where Allegory used to point to the endless copies of copies, the image now points to a definite beginning, albeit an absent one. The structure of the passage is revealing: directly after we get the ultimate depiction of Allegory’s inability to signify, the depiction of Allegory as “a paralyzed dumb witness,” the suggestion of a future of prolific signification is assured. Dickens writes: “So it shall happen

surely, through many years, that ghostly stories shall be told of the stain upon the floor, so easy to be covered, so hard to be got out.”

That this proliferation of stories, of *histories*, is projected beyond the moment of the investigation and discovery of the perpetrator, reveals the interest that the detective narrative structure has in relationship to the historical crisis that Chancery’s dysfunction represents. Again, within the confines strictly of the generic conventions of detective stories, the point would seem to be the discovery of the as yet undiscovered but discoverable truth of the past—the beginning is mystery and an absent origin, and the story ends when that has been discovered. Positioned as it is within *Bleak House*, however, its beginning—Tulkinghorn’s murder—and its end—Hortense’s capture and confession—appear to construct the smallest meaningful system in a world of fragments; and this system actually diverts attention away from the other, larger investigation into identity. In pointing to the spot where Mr. Tulkinghorn’s corpse lay, the Roman also points to the spot where Tulkinghorn’s investigation into Lady Dedlock’s false position in her marriage ends and Mr. Bucket’s much less potentially erosive investigation into the murder begins. (That it is less erosive is indicated by the fact that the murder actually has no rational motive and the perpetrator’s guilt has no social resonance—Hortense, Lady Dedlock’s maid and a *Frenchwoman*, kills Tulkinghorn out of rage and resentment.) Indeed, Mr. Bucket is even responsible for closing down the investigation into identities that threatens to reveal the truth about Lady Dedlock’s past.

The detective narrative, then, gets the novel beyond the problem of origins and history. Beginning at an arbitrary beginning, a break in the circuit of repetitions in search of a true origin, the detective narrative proceeds to reconstruct reality from that arbitrary point, all the while laundering its own intrusion by appearing to be discovering instead of constructing. What this

offers the bourgeois world, then, is a structure for counterfeiting history, a way to make history out of any “origin” whatever. Not only is this important for the construction of bourgeois identities, the sewing of the bourgeoisie into history, the detective narrative is also a structure that legitimates the more fundamental system of meaning in the capitalist mode of production, that of the commodity. A version of history-making that appears legitimate but is also infinitely able to be repeated, a version of history in which multiple circuits with multiple origins can co-exist contributes to the sublime objectivity of the commodity.

### 3.0 SECRETS AND THE ENCLOSURE OF DOMESTIC SPACE IN WILKIE COLLINS' *THE DEAD SECRET*

...for the gods of modernity...do indeed stand up for bastards<sup>294</sup>

Far from revealing all at the end, far from laying everything bare so that there are no more secrets lurking behind the identities of its characters, *Bleak House* ends elliptically, concealing the true face of Esther Summerson just as Mr. Bucket suppresses the letters that could reveal her true identity (as Lady Dedlock's illegitimate daughter) to the public. The novel ends with Woodcourt, Esther's husband, catching her pondering the looks she has always told us she lost during her bout with smallpox; but instead of confirming something we have always understood from Esther's perspective, Woodcourt asks her whether she "know[s] that [she is] prettier than [she] ever [was]?"<sup>295</sup> No, she tells us:

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most

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<sup>294</sup> Franco Moretti, "The *Bildungsroman* as Symbolic Form," *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>295</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, eds. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 770.



benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—<sup>296</sup>

At the end of a novel so preoccupied with disguise and unmasking, it is an interesting demur.

Accustomed by now to Esther's coyness, her manner of revealing by indirection, we cannot help but feel led to conclude that Esther *is* prettier now; in a novel so saturated by the idea that children inherit the appearance of their parents, it is difficult to imagine the mention of how pretty her daughters are to be signifying anything else, especially as that detail reminds us of how much Esther resembled her own famously beautiful mother. And though the description of the appearances of others in her little household may seem to convey a more general beatitude, Esther is unwilling to let go of the initial question of her appearance, calling us back to it by her "even supposing." Yet, while the reader is meant to understand that Esther probably *is* "prettier now," despite her bout with smallpox, the uncertainty of this interpretation is significant. Even though the reader has been deliberately evoked at the beginning of this chapter as "the unknown friend to whom [Esther] write[s]"<sup>297</sup>, this elliptical ending severs that communication between Esther and the reader. At the last, Esther's refusal to state this particular thing directly introduces a new secret-sharing relationship between her and her husband, locking the reader out of the little family circle Esther has cultivated. Esther does not show her face; indeed, she turns her back on the reader, leaving the reader bereft of the intimacy she and Esther once shared, an intimacy now shared between Esther and the family who can see and know her face.

This is the final and necessary movement of Esther's (self-)formation. Esther has earned a place for herself by making herself over in the images of others' desires, images whose outlines she has been able to glimpse and recreate through careful study, having no apparent inclination

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 767.

of her own except to “do some good to someone, and win some love to [her]self.”<sup>298</sup> In relationship to the reader, she is similarly subjected. Ironically, she can only achieve the presence of an inner self by “unpack[ing] [her] heart with words.”<sup>299</sup> Esther has no private thought that the reader does not share; we must know her intimately for her to have an identity. This, however, is a feature that could potentially undermine that identity, or at least its legitimacy; there is the threat of her seeming, as Hamlet also feared, “like a whore,” “a very drab”—known by too many. Indeed, at the same time her narrative creates an identity, it also threatens to expose its dependence upon circulation. Her identity is both created and tested through a set of exchanges at the nexus of each of which her value is compounded. Hiding her true face from the reader, then, solves this problem; she is no longer our Esther or anyone else’s; now she is Woodcourt’s, and whether she is “prettier” or not is only for him to say.

Such a move to shield the lady from the penetrating gaze of public scrutiny, or to at least carefully mediate her exposure, is something Anthea Trodd discovers to be an interesting feature of 19<sup>th</sup> Century sensation fiction. In her examination of the relationships inhabited by “The Policeman and the Lady”<sup>300</sup> in the novels of the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Trodd exposes the ideological freight borne by encounters between these two figures. She argues that such encounters were “fraught with problems for the writer” which were “at one level problems concern[ing] etiquette, uncertainties about the social status of the policeman, and the conversational peculiarities of being interrogated by a kind of higher servant or lower tradesman.”<sup>301</sup> Further, she argues, “the encounters betray deep fears about the threat to the

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>299</sup> *Hamlet*, Act II, scene iii.

<sup>300</sup> Anthea Trodd, “The Policeman and the Lady,” *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (London: MacMillan Press, 1989), pp. 12-44.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

world of domestic innocence posed by the new police world of subterfuge and surveillance.”<sup>302</sup> And, in general, the detective bears the threat of associating private domestic space with the streets, at best, and with the criminal underworld, at worst.

Trodd finds in *Salem Chapel* by Margaret Oliphant, a perfect, albeit extreme, example of the anxiety that was produced by the encounter between the lady and the policeman. The novel, Trodd argues, is “a striking tribute to the difficulties” of bringing these two figures together because of its ingenious device of keeping the policeman from the lady by “keep[ing] her *ingénue* in a state of literal unconsciousness throughout the novel.”<sup>303</sup> Trodd recounts the novel, telling us that Susan Vincent, the *ingénue* in question, is suspected by a police detective of attempting to murder a man rumored to have seduced her. While she lays unconscious with “brain fever,” the detective “sits near her bedside, attempting to decipher a criminal confession from the innocent ravings of her delirium.”<sup>304</sup> Meanwhile, “her mother and brother are left to suffer the agonising experience of a home desecrated by a police detective engaged in the coarsely ingenious speculations of his kind.”<sup>305</sup> In the end, the man Susan purportedly attempted to murder recovers and proves her innocent. Susan too recovers; and the policeman is put decidedly back in his place. The novel thus vindicates prejudices against the police and, according to Trodd, reaffirms the idea “that domestic disputes, however bitter, are best resolved within the family,” while the detective is put down as “an officious and misguided interloper.”<sup>306</sup>

There are also the texts of authors more sympathetic to the detective police, such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, which, while celebrating their detectives, similarly bear the signs of the careful negotiation public sentiment demanded. In “The Modern Science of Thief-

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

Taking,”<sup>307</sup> Dickens and W. H. Wills *use* the anxieties concerning the detective police to shape his very image by adapting the prejudices considered by Trodd. Dickens first draws a line between the street and the domestic realm that is simultaneously about space and about class:

if an urchin picks your pocket, or a bungling ‘artist’ steals your watch so that you find it out in an instant, it is easy enough for any private in any of the seventeen divisions of London Police to obey your panting demand to ‘Stop thief!’<sup>308</sup>

“But the contrivances of those who wheedle money out of your pocket rather than steal it; who cheat you with your eyes open; who clear every vestige of plate out of your pantry while the servant is on the stairs,” require “a superior order of police.”<sup>309</sup> Thus initiates Dickens revision of the image of the police detective against the image of the regular police constable, whereby the coarse, bumptious, and heavy-footed image that articulates the fears and class prejudice against the police *detective* is reproduced as the image of the regular police *constable* whom the detective investigator spares the respectable household. Flagged by the over-determined phrase “modern science” in the title itself, Dickens sets up a distinction between the intellect and precision of the detective and the honest and homely action of the regular police constable, a distinction which works along the very class biases that originally fueled the distrust of a detective police division (a subject of much Parliamentary abuse in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries<sup>310</sup>). Dickens begins: “If thieving be an Art (and who denies that its more subtle and

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<sup>307</sup> “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking” was jointly written by W. H. Wills and Charles Dickens with the latter having editorial control; cf. *Uncollected Writings from Household Words 1850-1859*, Ed. Harry Stone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

<sup>308</sup> “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking,” *Hunted Down: The Detective Stories of Charles Dickens*, Ed. Peter Haining (London: Peter Owen, 1996), p.61.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> Cf. Clive Emsley, *The English Police: A Political and Social History* (New York: Longman, 1996).

delicate branches deserve to be ranked as one of the Fine Arts?), thief-taking is a Science.”<sup>311</sup>

He goes on:

All the thief’s ingenuity; all of his knowledge of human nature; all his courage; all his coolness; all his imperturbable powers of face; all his manual and digital dexterity; all his fertility in expedients, and promptitude in acting upon them; all his Protean cleverness of disguise and capability of counterfeiting every sort of condition of distress; together with a great deal more patience, and the additional qualification, integrity, are demanded for the higher branches of thief-taking.<sup>312</sup>

Worth looking at are the ideological negotiations going on in Dickens’s imaginative reconstruction of the police detective. First, Dickens’s construction of the detective is interesting when read against earlier notions of what would make a good policeman as it is articulated in such tracts as Patrick Colquhoun’s *A Treatise on the Police of London*<sup>313</sup> and John Wade’s *A Treatise on the Police and Crimes of the Metropolis*.<sup>314</sup> In going over the character traits that he thinks would be exemplary, Wade, for example, lays emphasis, beyond the necessary knowledge of the law, on the importance of having “an *acquaintance with life*,” by which it soon becomes clear he means specifically criminal and low life.<sup>315</sup> A policeman “ought to be intimately acquainted” “with the localities of [his] jurisdiction, and the prevailing character of the population, their occupations, amusements, and habits,” as well as having “a general knowledge of all the arts of fraud, imposture, and depredation.”<sup>316</sup> Further, the policeman must be able to

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<sup>311</sup> “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking,” p. 61.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Police of London* (Philadelphia: Benjamin Davies and Henry Sweitzer, 1778).

<sup>314</sup> John Wade, *A Treatise on the Police and Crimes of the Metropolis*, 1829, Patterson Smith Reprint Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems (Montclair NJ: Patterson Smith, 1972).

<sup>315</sup> Wade, *Treatise*, p. 9.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

lay claim to the “power of discriminating criminal character,” must be able to “read, almost infallibly, in the face and manner, incorrigible vagrant, hardened thief, or accomplished swindler.”<sup>317</sup> Add all this up, and the conclusion one must draw is that “to be a perfect criminal judge, it is almost essential to have previously mingled in scenes of delinquency; for the criminal mind has motives of action, habits of thinking, and is influenced by circumstances, which those who have felt and acted honestly can never enter into or appreciate.”<sup>318</sup> In fact, Wade suggests, “reformed rogues [...], if one could trust them, would make the best thief-takers; and the whole establishment from highest to lowest be most ably filled by men who are themselves honest, though versant in all the arts of fraud and depredation.”<sup>319</sup>

The difference between the two is the difference between imagining such a figure roaming the streets and poking his head into pubs and gaming houses<sup>320</sup> and imagining such a figure entering the homes of the genteel classes. Wade is talking about a police officer not unlike in character a Bow Street Runner (the predecessor to the modern police who by Dickens’s time was generally remembered to be equal parts law enforcer and rogue)<sup>321</sup>, though the treatise is an investigation into the problems concerning the structure of law enforcement that fostered the Runners. Wade’s is a policeman who can get a little dirty but enforce the laws without

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Throughout Wade’s *Treatise...*, all suggestions that the police might enter onto a private scene are carefully explained; the *Treatise...*, therefore, stands as a record of the resistance to the idea of the police encroaching on private life and also, consequently, as a resistance to the idea of a detective police in the way we would know it today.

<sup>321</sup> The Bow Street Runners, a group of “professional thief-takers” under the command of the Bow Street Magistrate’s Court, presided over by Sir Henry Fielding during the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. For all intents and purposes the first group of agents expressly dedicated to the detection and prevention of crime, though they grew up out of various parish run watches and other customary kinds of policing, the Bow Street Runners became the model for the institution of eight other similar offices around London. By the turn of the century, there was an increasing concern with policing in London particularly, and the idea that a new kind of police, more centrally organized with more numbers and more authority, was necessary to maintain order in the growing metropolis; cf. Emsley’s *The English Police* and Gilbert Armitage, *The History of the Bow Street Runners: 1729-1829* (London: Wishart and Co., 193-?).

prejudice or self-interest. Dickens's description has to revise this image considerably while maintaining a large part of its essential content; imagining a reformed rogue with authority in the private rooms of the bourgeoisie is just not possible. One way that Dickens raises the status of the detective, therefore, is to raise the status of the criminal. The criminal the detective would be concerned with, in Dickens's version, is practically genteel, if not strictly speaking a gentleman and if not, strictly speaking, behaving properly. Dickens's detective doesn't have to "get down" with the criminal in question. They both share a superior position in relation to common humanity in terms of intelligence, if not in terms of morality. The differences between criminal and detective in Dickens's scheme are the qualities of integrity and patience. Having knowledge of Wade's criminal, on the other hand, almost means having knowledge of a separate, lower species; elsewhere Wade claims: "The criminal mind approximates nearest to that of man in a natural state, being more under the influence of feeling than reason [...]."<sup>322</sup> The criminal is figured as animalistic in that, "the only motives which hold out allurements are pleasures to be enjoyed; the only evils dreaded are pains to be endured."<sup>323</sup> To be able to know Wade's criminal, one needs to be intimate with a lower state of existence; and, even though Wade briefly entertains the possibility that one could be raised from that position and redeemed, suggesting the possibility of a "reformed rogue,"<sup>324</sup> this intimacy is ultimately damning, especially as it would have resonated with fears of atavism and degeneration.

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<sup>322</sup> Wade, *Treatise*, p. 17.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> In Wade's worldview, there is little hope for reforming criminals in any real sense. With regards to treatment of criminals, his prescriptions involving some form of quarantining of the criminal and reduction of stimuli that would incite his natural criminality. On the score of what to do with a criminal once he is caught, Wade suggests that "punishment should be corporal rather than mental, and if publicly inflicted," he urges that the "more solemn and appalling they are in the exhibition," then the "more likely to counterbalance temptations to crime," p. 17. Not a believer in the possibility of reform since "choice as much as chance has given [criminals] their position in the social scale," Wade "fear[s] that the best precautions society can adopt toward them is in the certainty of punishment, in the strength of [the] prisons, and in the vigilance of a well-organized police," p. 19. But above all, Wade likes the solution of "perpetual banishment"—i.e., transportation to the colonies—the best, p. 21.

As Dickens revises the criminal, giving him “ingenuity,” an intense “knowledge of human nature,” and a “Protean cleverness,” he assures readers of a boundary between private and public space and deputizes the detective for the protection of the former against the encroachments of the latter. The detective is not now someone whose entry into the domestic realm is to be feared as an intrusion and a violation; he is the very figure of its protection. Arguing that the following “one instance will show the difference between a regular and a detective policeman,”<sup>325</sup> Dickens offers a facetiously nightmarish scenario in “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking” to substantiate this new image of the detective. He asks you to imagine that “your wife discovers on retiring for the night, that her toilette has been plundered; her drawers are void; [...] all the fond tokens you gave her when her pre-nuptial lover, are gone; [...]. Every valuable is swept away with the most discriminating villainy; for no other thing in the chamber has been touched; not a chair has been moved;”<sup>326</sup> etc. After all the household is alarmed, you, the reader to whom this scenario is addressed, “suggest sending for the Police.”<sup>327</sup> In keeping with the fears Trodd has analyzed, Dickens points out that this “is taken as a suspicion of, and insult on the whole assembled household, and [the servants] descend into the lower regions of the house in the sulks.”<sup>328</sup>

The events to which Dickens next treats the now alarmed reader very much echo the fears of a Margaret Oliphant with respect to the intrusion of detectives, only it is not the detective but the regular constable who is at fault. The regular constable, named by Dickens, “X 49,” enters the scene and “turns his bull’s-eye into every corner, and upon every countenance (including that

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<sup>325</sup> Dickens, “The Modern Science of Thief-Taking,” p. 62.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.



of the cat), on the premises.”<sup>329</sup> Dickens’s treatment of the scene continues in particularly choice comic style:

He examines all the locks, bolts, and bars, bestowing extra diligence on those which enclosed the stolen treasures. These he declares have been ‘Violated;’ by which he means that there has been more than one ‘Rape of the Lock.’<sup>330</sup>

Soon the constable’s inadequacy becomes felt as an effective derangement of bourgeois domestic space. The constable “takes you solemnly aside, darkens his lantern, and asks if you suspect any of your servants, in a mysterious whisper, which implies that *he* does.”<sup>331</sup>

He then examines the upper bedrooms, and in that of the female servants he discovers the least valuable of the rings, and a cast-off silver toothpick between the mattresses. You have every confidence in your maids; but what *can* you think? You suggest their safe custody; but your wife intercedes, and the policeman would prefer speaking to his inspector before he locks anybody up.<sup>332</sup>

The point is that “had the whole matter remained in the hands of X 49, it is possible that your troubles would have lasted you till now. A train of legal proceedings—actions for defamation of character and suits for damages—would have followed, which would have cost more than the value of the jewels, and the entire execration of all your neighbours and every private friend of your domestics.”<sup>333</sup> In short, the sanctity of the hypothetical reader’s domestic sphere has been ruined.

Now, the worst case scenario is re-imagined for the better. Dickens tells you that “happily, the Inspector promptly sends a plain, earnest-looking man”—the detective, who

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

“settles the whole matter in ten minutes.”<sup>334</sup> Indeed, “his examination is ended in five,” because “as a connoisseur can determine the painter of a picture at the first glance, or a wine-taster the precise vintage of a sherry by the merest sip; so the Detective at once pounces upon the authors of the work of art under consideration, by the style of performance”<sup>335</sup>—in this case by entering from neighboring rooftops through a garret window. The perpetrator turns out to be a professional criminal of a particular gang; eventually “your wife gets nearly every article back; her damsels’ innocence is fully established; and the thief is taken from his ‘school’ to spend a long holiday in a penal colony.”<sup>336</sup> In this scenario, the detective becomes the preserver of domestic peace. Not only does he clear everyone in the household and assuage the antagonisms that have momentarily arisen between upstairs and downstairs, he also assures you that your criminal was not a common street urchin but another kind of professional, one who has infiltrated your private space, literally, from above rather than sully your threshold with dirt from the street.

Nevertheless, such prejudices against the police detective play a prominent role in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, and quite a bit of the novel’s plot twists can be attributed to its negotiation of these prejudices. It is with mixed feelings that the Verinder household gives entry to Sergeant Cuff, the novel’s official detective. Mr. Franklin Blake, nephew to Lady Verinder and cousin to Rachel Verinder, welcomes Sgt. Cuff with enthusiasm. Blake, having “heard some curious anecdotes about him [...] in London,” believes Cuff will clear up the mystery of the eponymous missing diamond in no time.<sup>337</sup> He assures the family: “If half the stories I have heard are true, when it comes to unravelling a mystery, there isn’t the equal in England of

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> *The Moonstone*, p.95.

Sergeant Cuff!”<sup>338</sup> Blake’s anticipation is taken with a grain of salt, however, considering that he has grown up on the continent, and what part of his character retains its boyhood Englishness as opposed to the various continental influences that might be detected still, as far as Gabriel Betteredge (the Verinders’ steward) is concerned, remains to be seen.

After the eponymous Yellow Diamond is discovered missing and before Cuff arrives, there is an interim period when the case is in the hands of the local Superintendent of police, Seegrave, whose performance reads very much like Dickens’s worst case scenario.<sup>339</sup> With characteristic and comical misjudgment, Betteredge welcomes this local worthy as “the most comforting officer you could wish to see”<sup>340</sup>; meanwhile, the Superintendent is worse than useless at discovering any relevant information. Indeed, he goes so far as to ignore the important clue of the paint smear on Rachel’s sitting room door at the same time he alerts Rosanna Spearman to it, giving her the opportunity of destroying the nightshirt that made it. Instead, Seegrave simply discovers what Blake himself earlier discovered—that no one had broken into the house and that “the robbery, consequently, must have been committed by some person in the house.”<sup>341</sup>

As it turns out, Seegrave is not wrong about this. What we eventually learn at the conclusion to the mystery is that someone in the house did indeed take the diamond; but the inside of this particular locked room is an incredibly labyrinthine space of mystery that stems ultimately from the family’s darker side. The Diamond Rachel inherits on her birthday is a dubious gift. The history of the Diamond, given in the Prologue, is a history of theft, religious mystery, and vendetta. In the Prologue a family letter reveals that Rachel’s uncle, John

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Trodd also makes this connection but draws different conclusions from it, not noting the difference between Seegrave’s and Cuff’s performance in the house; see p. 26.

<sup>340</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 83.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

Herncastle is suspected of having stolen a famous Indian diamond whose theft had been attempted many times throughout the centuries. Legend has it that “the deity breathed the breath of his divinity on the Diamond in the forehead of the god” in which it was originally set and “commanded that the Moonstone should be watched, from that time forth, by three priests in turn, night and day, to the end of the generations of men.”<sup>342</sup> Nevertheless, the letter accuses, during an imperial military campaign, Herncastle murders the priests protecting the Diamond and steals it. He is cursed by the last murdered priest and lives in fear for the rest of his life. Also, he is shunned by the family because of the narrative contained in the letter. On one of Rachel’s earlier birthdays, he arrives at the Verinder’s house in London (Mrs. Verinder being his sister) to wish Rachel a happy birthday, but Mrs. Verinder refuses to let him enter or to speak to him. For revenge, he bequeaths the Diamond to Rachel on her first birthday after his death, provided that Lady Verinder is still living,<sup>343</sup> hoping presumably to transfer the Diamond’s curse to his niece. Franklin Blake, whose father (Mrs. Verinder’s sister’s husband) did have dealings with Herncastle, is eventually charged with the execution of this bequeath, and he brings it to the Verinder home a month before Rachel’s party.

It is Blake’s own anxiety over his part in the conveyance of the cursed Diamond that causes its loss. During Rachel’s birthday celebration, Blake had been complaining of his recent sleeplessness as the result of his attempt to quit smoking. (He is quitting for Rachel, who despises the habit.) Hearing this, the local doctor, Mr. Candy, attempts to offer medical advice and some medicine to help him deal with his withdrawal.<sup>344</sup> Blake, however, “attacked the art of medicine [...] with sufficient rashness and sufficient pertinacity to put even Mr. Candy out of

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

temper.”<sup>345</sup> Taking it upon himself to take Blake “down a peg,”<sup>346</sup> Candy administered Blake a draught of laudanum without his knowing it, planning to reveal the subterfuge the next morning. (Candy is, in fact, unable to do so the next morning because he comes down with that infamous 19<sup>th</sup> Century “fever” and is trapped in his own delirium.) Under the influence of the laudanum and of his anxiety about the Diamond’s curse, Blake entered Rachel’s sitting room to remove the Diamond from its hiding place so he could secure it elsewhere and then, as the laudanum took further hold, forgot what he had done. It is Rachel’s other cousin and suitor, Godfrey Ablewhite, however, who steals the Diamond. Having been intending to steal the Diamond himself outright, Ablewhite instead witnesses Blake’s somnambulant wanderings, follows him, and takes the Diamond from where Blake placed it. And in the end, it is Ablewhite who is eventually the victim of the Diamond’s vendetta while the Diamond itself finds its way back to the idol in which it was originally set.

These revelations, of course, do not come until the end of a long and, again, labyrinthine journey, and far from advancing inquiry, Seegrave’s own participation only sets it back. Beyond the obvious fact that the house was not infiltrated by an outsider the night of Rachel’s birthday party, Seegrave serves only to put the house in an uproar because he not only concludes that the robbery was an inside job but that it was probably committed by one of the servants. His interrogation immediately starts with them, and he “post[s] one of his men on the staircase which led to the servants’ bed-rooms, with instructions to let nobody in the house pass him, till further orders.”<sup>347</sup> The idea is clearly to prevent the guilty party from slipping away with the Diamond. However, when the female servants all crowd into Rachel’s sitting room demanding “him to say

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

which one of them he suspect[s], at once,”<sup>348</sup> he foolishly alerts them to the smeared paint on Rachel’s door. This turns out to be important because the smear was actually caused by Blake’s nightshirt. Meanwhile, it turns out that Rosanna Spearman, a servant in love with Blake, has discovered the paint-stained nightgown in Blake’s room and, misunderstanding its import, hides it in a tin box, attaches it to rock, and sinks it under the Shivering Sand—an action that removes not only a crucial clue to the solution of the mystery but also a crucial piece of evidence for Blake’s absolution. And so, thanks to Seegrave’s interference, the household’s relations have become seriously disarranged and the only real clue to the events has been, for all intents and purposes, destroyed.

Unlike in Dickens’s “Modern Science...” piece, though, the arrival of the Metropolitan police detective in the person of Sgt. Cuff, a retired agent, does not immediately banish the specter of household corruption.

Rachel herself sees Blake take the Diamond from the cabinet where she placed it and, also assuming his intention was its theft, refuses to tell anyone what she saw, though, to be sure, she also harbors a sense of his betrayal along with his secret. Again, this is not something we find out until much later in the novel; instead, from the moment of the Diamond’s disappearance until the middle of the second volume, the reason behind Rachel’s refusal to speak to any members of the police is one of the novel’s greatest mysteries and one of its darkest possibilities. When Seegrave arrives, she refuses to speak to him to everyone’s surprise and later confronts him, saying “‘*I have not sent for you!*’ [...] *I don’t want you. My Diamond is lost. Neither you nor anybody else will ever find it!*’”<sup>349</sup> Likewise, when Cuff arrives, she refuses to speak with him and offers no help. Ultimately, she refuses to have her own wardrobe searched for the

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

missing stained article of clothing thus, Cuff believes, putting any immediate solution to the mystery out of reach.

Cuff's response to this represents the kind of threat to family reputation and domestic space that Trodd tells us the Victorians feared so much. Lady Verinder's "presentiment that he is bringing trouble and misery with him into the house"<sup>350</sup> is confirmed by the shadow of suspicion his investigation casts on Rachel's reputation. He puts his case to Lady Verinder:

'I have been largely employed in cases of family scandal, acting in the capacity of confidential man. The one result of my domestic practice which has any bearing on the matter now in hand, is a result which I may state in two words. It is well within my experience, that young ladies of rank and position do occasionally have private debts which they dare not acknowledge to their nearest relatives and friends. Sometimes, the milliner and the jeweler are at the bottom of it. Sometimes, the money is wanted for purposes which I don't suspect in this case, and which I won't shock you by mentioning [...]'<sup>351</sup>

And, based on this past experience, he tells Lady Verinder, the circumstances—Rachel's refusal to do anything toward aiding in the recovery of her Diamond—force him to conclude that "she has debts she daren't acknowledge, that must be paid" and "that the Diamond must be secretly pledged to pay them."<sup>352</sup>

The suggestion of Rachel's treachery, whether her debts are frivolous or unmentionable, nevertheless impugns her virtue significantly. The unmentionable possibilities suggest some kind of sexual imprudence no more and no less than the fact that Rachel has both lied and faked

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

a robbery. This is because the Diamond is associated with Rachel's virginity in several ways. Not only is it hidden in a small, secret drawer in her bedroom sitting room, it is more sacred if left intact (though more valuable when cut, the import of which detail I will discuss later). When she thinks the thief is Blake, the idea that he stole it when she would have given it freely if he needed it also suggests its association with her virginity. Moreover, in the letter that Rosanna

Spearman addresses to Blake before she commits suicide, she makes the connection more explicit, by at first inferring that the stain on the gown might mean a theft of another kind. She writes: "I shall not tell you in plain words what was the first suspicion that crossed my mind, when I had made that discovery." But she considers that the stain could not mean what her first inference suggested because even if Blake had been careless of the door, Rachel herself "would never have let you carry away such a witness against her."<sup>353</sup> Rachel's silence and its availability for interpretation seriously threaten her reputation.

At this point, we have to wonder why the Victorians let the police detective into the house in the first place. Trodd concludes that while "the claim that the home should manage its own affairs was based on the assertion of its superior morality to that of the public sphere," actually "what the arrival of the police might expose was that, if the home was a sanctuary from public life, it was as an outlaws' refuge, operating with superior methods of manipulation and subterfuge."<sup>354</sup> And perhaps the sense of the police as a necessary evil to be endured for the greater good of keeping the working class and lumpenproletariat in line provides some explanation. With regard to this, Trodd notes that the "acceptance of the desirability of police surveillance over the lives and homes of the lower orders was part of the general movement in the organisation of urban life to protect the privacy of the middle class while keeping the

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>354</sup> Trodd, p. 44.



working class securely supervised.”<sup>355</sup> Stories such as *The Moonstone* in which the detective attempts to penetrate the privacy of bourgeois domestic space but is proven unequal to the job of interpreting the inner-workings of the bourgeois mind and its motivations, then, would seem to re-assert that the detective’s place is in the streets. According to this, it would seem that the detective is invited into the Victorian, bourgeois home only to be symbolically stripped of any authority there more effectively than a bar to his entrance would have done.

The detective should not be understood as a necessary part of the package of police surveillance of urban space, however. It is fair enough to consider the commissioning of the new Metropolitan Police Force in 1829 to be partially a measure against the prospect of working class agitation. After all, the new police force was tirelessly promoted by none other than Robert Peel, the former Chief Secretary of Ireland responsible for the establishment of the Irish Constabulary.<sup>356</sup> Historian Clive Emsley points out that the outfitting of the new police—its “tophats, uniforms of blue, [and] swallow-tail coats with the minimum of decoration”<sup>357</sup>—was primarily designed to avoid the appearance that “Peel had imported into London many of the policing practices developed in Ireland to deal with civil unrest.”<sup>358</sup> The detective division, on the other hand, was not fully developed until some 30 years later. Although detective work was done and there were officers who were sent out in plain clothes prior to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, it wasn’t until 1869 that an actual detective division of the Metropolitan Police was created. For over a decade after its inception, it continued to co-exist with the Bow Street Runners, who did most of the work we would class as criminal investigation,<sup>359</sup> while the Metropolitan Police’s duties were carefully adumbrated and relegated to those things which would fall under the

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>356</sup> Emsley, p. 26.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>359</sup> Emsley.

heading of crime prevention. In any case, for a long time, the idea that the prevention of crime and other kinds of police work could exist separately.

Nevertheless, it's true that the detective comes and goes without making much material difference to the conditions he meets at the Verinder house. In the end, it is a cast of local characters, including Mr. Candy's assistant Ezra Jennings and Betteredge, who help Franklin Blake piece past events together again. And when they do so, the structure of the family changes only slightly. The revelation of Ablewhite's guilt comes with news from the city but the revelation is as peripheral as Ablewhite himself was at the beginning of the novel. He may have also wanted to marry Rachel but the bond between Rachel and Franklin (and the threat of its being completely severed) is the one that matters. Moreover, the revelation of Ablewhite's guilt only confirms the dishonesty Rachel discovers in him earlier. Out of despair over what she thinks is Blake's betrayal, Rachel agrees to marry Ablewhite, but she soon discovers that he has inquired into the terms of her inheritance and whether Rachel will receive the principle or the income. Upon learning this, she tells him that she will not inherit what he expects, and he breaks the engagement. The discovery of his actual criminal guilt, on the other hand, is almost an afterthought, and much of the resolution of the theft of the Diamond and its consequences outside the family is dealt with "offstage."

The detective *narrative*, on the other hand, is important to the survival of the Verinder estate. The Herncastle family and, consequently, the Verinder family are threatened by a poison legacy. As Dickens does in *Bleak House*, Collins associates various forms of degeneration with the perpetuation of aristocratic lines. The stolen Diamond, got by theft, betrayal, and murder that could potentially bleed the family is one symbol of inheritance in general. Against this, the Verinder estate is presented as an untailed world of possibility; it is even possibly the site of a

brave new world innocent of traditions of debauchery, something that is suggested by the fact that the steward, Betteredge, is always turning to *Robinson Crusoe* when in need of guidance. What the detective narrative does is rid the Verinder estate of its ties to the dark secrets of the past, replacing older relationships with the household of a young bourgeois couple (Rachel comes from titled, landed gentry, but Franklin Blake's father is middle-class). And not only does the detective narrative rid the household of its diabolical inheritance (something I will discuss in more detail in a later chapter), it also authenticates the household's respectability—a virtue distinct from older forms of authentication—in so far as it symbolically rids it of the legacy of guilt by proving everyone innocent of this most recent theft of the Diamond.

It is this exonerating function of the detective narrative that is the key to its operation in bourgeois domestic space; however, its exonerating function has been rendered nearly invisible by the common critical assumption that the detective narrative mediates the inherent struggle between the working class and the upper classes. The problem with this assumption is more than that it misses the mark; it also further obscures the other class struggle: the struggle of the bourgeoisie to legitimate itself within institutions from an older time, the struggle of the bourgeoisie to appear in the guise of the legitimate heir of political power. In this struggle, the bourgeois order that the detective may or may not protect from working class incursion is by no means assured and stable but is instead that which must be defined. Both the exonerating function and the structure of the detective narrative are crucial to the fabrication and stabilization of this order.

Hitherto, a good deal of criticism regarding the ideology of Collins's presentations of the Victorian household, and especially women's place within it, has been dominated by an either/or logic that tends to reinforce rather than dismantle the fictions of the Victorian family and

bourgeois domestic space. Such critics often establish a line of transgression that is supposed to mark the boundary beyond which representations of home and self become deconstructive and analyze Collins's fiction in terms of whether he ultimately crosses or steps back over the line of acceptability. This is not to say that critics of Collins usually reduce the novels to a choice between one side of that line or the other. Instead, many critics trace a set of deconstructive movements whereby his novels are discovered to both support and undermine the dominant ideologies of his day, crossing and recrossing the line. Nevertheless, the line remains.

For instance, Elizabeth Rose Gruner argues that *The Moonstone* "calls into question what writers like Sarah Ellis had celebrated as 'one of [England's] noblest features...the home comforts and fireside virtues' of the Victorian family, and it asks us not to trust in its appearance."<sup>360</sup> She reads Collins as interrogating the structure of the "Victorian family" concerning "whose purposes [...] it serve[s]," and concludes that "the answer does not come back in the family's favor."<sup>361</sup> In the end, however, Gruner believes that Collins does not completely supercede the dominant culture. She argues that "having upset convention by valorizing his passionate, secret, self-willed heroine and exposing the hypocrisy and criminality of the Victorian family," Collins nevertheless "quietly reinscribes her into the system with her marriage to Franklin."<sup>362</sup>

Similarly, Tamar Heller reads Collins's heroines and plots in relationship to the female Gothic as subverting but also ultimately being contained within the dominant ideology of femininity that goes hand in hand with patriarchy. Of *The Moonstone*, she writes that it "is a novel that tells two stories, a masculine one about the triumph of male reason, and a feminine

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<sup>360</sup> Elizabeth Rose Gruner, "Family Secrets and the Mysteries of *The Moonstone*," *Wilkie Collins: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Lyn Pykett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 221-222; ellipses are Gruner's.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

one about buried writing, associated with the subversive discourses of the Gothic and radical Romanticism that cannot be wholly effaced.”<sup>363</sup> The interest of these novels, for Heller, is that they remain permanent witnesses to subversive and suppressed visions of the family. Linking the strand of the female Gothic to the buried letters of Collins’s heroines, she writes: “Like these buried texts, the female Gothic may be contained by the conservative narratives of professionalization and domesticity in Collins’ fiction, yet always resurfaces to tell its story of subversion.”<sup>364</sup>

While these analyses and others which pivot around similar axes offer intricate and insightful readings of Collins’s work, the poetics of subversion and containment lend more stability and claim more definite structure than the Victorian family warrants. The versions of the family that circulate in these critiques tend to perpetuate its mystification. This is because all difference in relationship to the simplified construct of the family is relegated to its “other” while the transactions that constitute bourgeois domestic and familial relations are thereby rendered invisible. That is, the reading of Collins as a writer who transgresses, who takes his plots and characters over the line of what can be accepted within the bounds of Victorian domesticity (and who ultimately fails to keep them there), draws a straighter line between “inside” and “outside” than we should believe in. Instead, a look at discourse and legislation concerned with or impinging upon the construction of the family in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and especially the Victorian period, reveals it to be a site of profound ideological contest at one and the same time that it will eventually come to function as a hegemonic tool, “compel[ling] us,” in the words of Franco Moretti, “to re-examine the current notion of ‘modern ideology,’ or ‘bourgeois culture’” and to

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<sup>363</sup> Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

recognize “that the truly central ideologies of our world are not in the least—contrary to widespread certainties; more widespread still, incidentally, in deconstructionist thought—intolerant, normative, monologic, to be wholly submitted to or rejected. Quite the opposite: they are pliant and precarious, ‘weak’ and ‘impure’.”<sup>365</sup> This is to say that the family functions less as a structure, with a definite inside and outside, and more as a mobile, absorbing, and re-territorializing machine for enclosing and redefining subjects.

It is Margaret Homans’s essay “Victoria’s Sovereign Obedience: Portraits of the Queen as Wife and Mother”<sup>366</sup> that helps illuminate this nature of the bourgeois family. Homans offers an incisive reading of the construction of the Queen’s public image that is also instructive regarding the construction of Victorian private space and harmonious domesticity. Homans asks the question: “What made it possible, at a time when women were meant to ‘obey’, for a woman to occupy the throne of England for sixty-three years and to leave the monarchy’s domestic and international prestige, if not its political authority, enhanced?”<sup>367</sup> Her answer to this question involves an analysis of Victoria’s complex manipulation of her public image so as to always ambiguously convey both her sovereignty and her subordination as middle-class wife and mother. Homans analyzes several portraits, ones commissioned by the Queen herself and ones produced in popular media, for the way they register and answer the anxieties regarding a female monarch “in an era desiring to see the end of female power.”<sup>368</sup> She concludes “that posing as ordinary was Victoria’s mode of sovereignty.” Victoria “put her ordinariness on royal display

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Margaret Homans, “Victoria’s Sovereign Obedience: Portraits of the Queen as Wife and Mother,” *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, eds. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 169-197.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

for popular admiration;” and thereby, “paradoxically, she holds her sovereignty because of the popularity she accrues by appearing as an ordinary wife.”<sup>369</sup>

I do not have the space here to do justice to the complexity of her arguments and interpretations of the portraits’ multiple valences, but I am interested in the technique of the public display of private life that Homans discovers. In one particular portrait, Homans discusses the ambiguous placement and poses of Victoria, Albert, and their children. One of Homans’ interests in this painting, as in all those she analyzes, is the tension between the conventions for representing gender hierarchy and for representing monarchs. What she also notes, though, is the strange status this painting has in relationship to the private and public spheres. Of this painting of *The Royal Family in 1846*, Homans writes that it “mingles the genre of conversation piece with that of the formal state portrait, and the setting heightens the ambiguity (as to privacy and publicity)”<sup>370</sup> of other depictions of the Queen and Albert. She explains that “while the children in the right foreground seem to tumble about in a domestic space [...], albeit in their best clothes, the left background framing Victoria and Albert is an idealized and undomestic combination of ‘fine turquoise-blue skies’ (specifically requested by Albert) and formal drapery.”<sup>371</sup> Both the Queen and Albert are seated on “throne-like chairs,”<sup>372</sup> and the entire setting is at once formally at odds with its domestic atmosphere (or vice versa) and encompassed or contained by it. Homans further notes that Victoria’s “arm around her son thus conveys both domestic maternity and royal lineage, just as the setting conveys both state formality and domestic intimacy.”<sup>373</sup> One of the most salient questions Homans asks regarding such representations is: “Are Victoria and Albert public or private, indoors or out, onstage or

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Homans, p. 178.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

not?”<sup>374</sup> At one and the same time, she argues: “Privacy is being publicized [...], and public life privatized.”<sup>375</sup> This is to say that privacy depends upon its public presentation and the line between inside and outside must be displayed as such.

This illuminates the function of the detective narrative in bourgeois domestic space. Far from being threatened by exposure, as if it were a stable, structural entity with an inside and an outside, its existence as a privileged space absolutely depends upon investigation and exposure. In this respect, Collins’s novel *The Dead Secret*, neglected as a minor one in the Collins corpus, is fundamental to an understanding of the detective narrative. Though not explicitly a detective story, it offers a blueprint for the way that exposure and the circulation of images of domesticity are instrumental in fabricating bourgeois reality.

### **3.1 ENCLOSURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PATRIARCHAL FAMILY**

According to Marx, the social division of labor that is the family becomes an outmoded arrangement under industrialization. He writes:

The power of facts [...] at last compelled [the English Parliament] to acknowledge that large-scale industry, in overturning the economic foundation of the old family system, and the family labour corresponding to it, had also dissolved the old family relationships. The rights of children had to be proclaimed [...] It was not however the misuse of parental power that created the direct or indirect exploitation of immature labour-powers by capital, but rather the opposite, i.e., the capitalist mode of exploitation, by sweeping away the economic

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.



foundation which corresponded to parental power, made the use of parental power into its misuse.<sup>376</sup>

And this destruction of the family has a potential revolutionary side.

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes.<sup>377</sup>

This revolutionary potential, however, is subsumed under capitalism's arrangement of productive forces. Marx writes that, while "under appropriate conditions," that is, under a rational system, "the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must [...] turn into a source of humane development," "in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker."<sup>378</sup>

This is an analysis that goes a long way toward explaining why the Victorians dedicated so much energy to so many obsessive reiterations of the true nature of the family and the proper relations between the sexes. Though this account paints in broad strokes, what Marx brings into view here is the incompatibility between former familial relationships and the distribution of bodies in space needed for the thorough industrialization of England as well as its full conversion

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<sup>376</sup> Karl Marx, "Chapter 15: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry," *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1990), p. 620.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 621.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

to capitalist and commodity social relations. These former family arrangements are not, however, destroyed at once. (And, it is not completely clear what Marx's image of the pre-industrial family is, unless its structure corresponds to some kind of natural sexual division of labor, in which case we must view Marx as susceptible to the same nostalgic impulse as many of his contemporaries.) Instead, through various kinds of legislation, social policy, and modes of discourse, the social relations of the past are slowly transformed into capitalist relations through the conversion of the idea of the family and the home into a hegemonic tool to suppress the revolutionary potential released from the ties of the older forms of the division of labor. A study of the 1820's to 1830's condition of poor relief provides one important example of the hegemonic function of the new fetishism of the patriarchal family.

Poor relief, instituted as a permanent function of the state by the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1597, 1601 (henceforth, the Old Poor Law), came under fire around this time of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century for being inefficient. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with increasing industrialization and the consequent shift in the character of labor, the consequent crises in employment and lack of available work for rural laborers,<sup>379</sup> the poor rates began to rise (mostly in rural areas) to such an extent that reform of the Elizabethan law seemed necessary. More than just the inefficiency of the current state of poor relief and the increase in the poor rate, however, it was the nature of poor relief altogether and the vision of society for which it stood that were under scrutiny by a specific set of thinkers whose ideas were influenced by a mix of utilitarian and Malthusian ideas about political economy. In their attempts to accommodate (and in their

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<sup>379</sup> The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century crises in farm labor and rural subsistence can be broadly described as the result of the uneven and imperfect development of capitalist relations and industrial economics. A once viable, if not sufficiently valued, class of rural laborers began to be reconstructed as a residual class left behind as farming began to be transformed into a commodity industry. For detailed accounts of the elements of this uneven transformation and its effects on rural populations, see Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870*, pp. 137-156 and pp. 230-238 and Anthony Brundage pp. 37-60.

refusal to understand) capitalism's and industrialization's effect on rural populations and rural labor patterns and wages, poor law reformers came to focus on troubles with poor relief as the source rather than the reflection of the uneven development of capitalism in rural areas.

A strong sentiment of many would-be reformers was that the traditional system of poor relief—and poor relief *tout court*—promoted overpopulation of economically depressed areas, encouraged large families, and inhibited the proper functioning of the wage labor system, among other things. The bottom line was that these thinkers “believed the old Poor Law an irrational hindrance to the emergence of a free market in labour which they deemed essential to future prosperity.”<sup>380</sup> These were not the only voices to be heard, however. Resisting the vanguard of capital interests was a constituency of people who felt that poor relief was an important institution, whether because it created a sense of fealty in the underclasses toward the local gentry and thereby kept the poor tractable or more generally because it was in keeping with a traditional sense of the relations between farm laborers, parishioners, and land owners. Because the government that investigated the Old Poor Law and forged the New Poor Law was a coalition government, with Whig Earl Grey as Prime Minister but many Tories also interested in poor relief reform, it is difficult to sum up the conflicting energies and ideologies that had to compromise.<sup>381</sup> Nevertheless, it's fair to say that poor law reform ultimately followed the line of Whig progressivism.

Because eliminating poor relief altogether would have been impossible in the political climate of this era, poor relief reformers offered a proposal for what would be the next best thing in the way of shifting the responsibility for poor relief off of public institutions. Poor relief was

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<sup>380</sup> Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Longman, 1996), p. 230.

<sup>381</sup> Cf. Brundage, pp. 37-60.

centralized and came under the management of a national body that dictated policy to parishes, doing away with local solutions to local problems and imposing rules that seem designed best to deter all those who would seek relief. Chief amongst these rules was the workhouse test. What the workhouse test supposedly tested, as the OED succinctly puts it, was the “good faith” of the poor relief seeker. Poor relief applicants had to agree to enter the workhouse as a condition of poor relief if deemed necessary. What the workhouse test actually tested was the destitute person’s ability to withstand workhouse conditions against her need for relief. Upon entering the workhouse, families were split up and sent to different wards, one for able-bodied men, one for able-bodied women, one for children, one for the aged, and one for the infirm. Workhouse food was deliberately made barely palatable; workhouse work was monotonous, debilitating, and demeaning. Treatment inside the workhouse was humiliating; and one could be permanently marked by the stigma attached to being or having been a workhouse inhabitant. According to the New Poor Law commission, all of the able-bodied seeking poor relief were to be consigned to the workhouse. The idea was that the workhouse, with its ritual humiliations and the meanness of its accommodations would be so detestable that the poor would do anything to avoid seeking relief from the parish. The self-serving argument was that this would weed out the people for whom out relief was unnecessary but who had come to expect it as a right. However, while “the original poor law bill in 1834 [...] call[ed] for an end to all outdoor relief to the able-bodied by July 1835,” Anthony Brundage points out that “this clause had been struck from the bill in the House of Lords,” leaving “the workhouse test [...to] bec[o]me a matter to be negotiated between the central authority, the guardians, and, because of the fear of mass insurrections, the poor themselves.”<sup>382</sup> As a result, out relief continued to be given in modified and reduced forms.

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<sup>382</sup> Brundage, p. 76.

Although out relief did continue, the New Poor Law nevertheless ratified a change in attitudes toward the condition of poverty and the place of the poor in society. In rural, agricultural areas, residual feudal arrangements and structures of feeling still held sway. Destitution was more dominantly understood and treated as a temporary condition related to seasonal unemployment and various other factors; and its relief took a variety of forms—from wage supplements to multiple types of relief in kind (food for the hungry, clothing, etc.)—which expressed the sense that impoverished parishioners yet belonged, though they were not embraced,<sup>383</sup> within the structures of society and, more importantly, to the albeit hierarchical and inegalitarian local community. However, the proposal and often the practice of the cessation of out relief in favor of the workhouse ratified the attitude that persons suffering under poverty belonged to a separate sphere, a mass—indeed, the mass of people who were forced to enter the market as members of the reserve army of labor. In this way, the New Poor Law can be understood as a further or additional phase of enclosure. It was literally another phase in the “expropriation [...] of the peasant [...] from the soil”<sup>384</sup>—many families were forced to move on to places where they could find work, usually in industrialized areas. The New Poor Law, therefore, both literally and figuratively, gave the poor no place anymore. In this way, it is perhaps better to view it as the perfection of the tendency and aims of enclosure. Not only did it exile people from their places of belonging; it redefined all of space as inside one boundary or another, subject to one institution or another.

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<sup>383</sup> For discussions of the change in attitude toward poverty that accompanied the maturation of capitalist social relations in England, see Margaret A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution*, pp. 11-33; Marjorie Levine-Clark, “Engendering Relief: Women, Ablebodiedness, and the New Poor Law in Early Victorian England”; Anna Clark, “The New Poor Law and the Breadwinner Wage: Contrasting Assumptions”; Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930*, pp. 37-89; and Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850*.

<sup>384</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 876.

Against the radical and brutal reconfiguration of English society and the identity and place of people suffering from impoverishment, Anthony Brundage tells us, two strange bedfellows were briefly allied. On one end of the political spectrum were Conservative paternalists, whose anti-New Poor Law sentiment was “based on ideals of organic social relationships inherited from an earlier age” where there was to be a reciprocal relationship between the upper classes’ “strong sense of duty to care for the poor” and the lower classes’ “deference and respect.”<sup>385</sup> On the other end were Chartists who saw “the New Poor Law [as] a symptom of class rule” and whose aim was to gain a democratic system that “would quickly put an end to the New Poor Law [along with] all other oppressive acts.”<sup>386</sup> However, fragile as the alliance was, it was quickly broken by radical “militant opposition” to the New Poor Law and conservative reaction against it.<sup>387</sup> Eruptions of protest, riots, and violence attended the early years of the Law. In some places, elections for local poor law guardians who would carry out the Law’s orders were prevented by working-class intimidation, while in others, poor law guardians were bombarded with stones and other debris.<sup>388</sup> Some workhouses were destroyed, and so on.<sup>389</sup>

Absorbing some of these energies while disguising the state of class relations the New Poor Law ratified was another form of enclosure—the patriarchal family. There are many disagreements amongst historians of the New Poor Law regarding the finer points of its aims and its effects on the relationships between men, women, and children. Two of the contested topics that are significant to this study are “the breadwinner wage” as an index for the provision of out relief and the new “bastardy clauses.” The latter, the clauses pertaining to the disposition of

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<sup>385</sup> Brundage, p. 82.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

illegitimate children is infamous for shifting all the responsibility for the support of illegitimate children onto their mothers. Prior to the Law, unmarried mothers could get support from the unmarried father's parish which would in its turn extract money from the father of the child so as to relieve the burden from poor rate payers. This required that the mother make a "claim of filiation" against the father. As a result, the system was subject to abuses. Moralists regularly produced tales of such abuses where innocent men were victimized by sexually predatory and feckless women. And, parishes are said to have bribed women to make claims against wealthier men so as to reduce their poor rates. So, though unmarried mothers were ever the subject of moralizing condemnations, in this era of poor law reform, they became the symbols of national moral decay and entropy. According to one way of thinking, then, the cessation of parish relief and parish involvement in establishing filiation would give no impetus to these women who supposedly had children in order to support themselves through poor relief and in order to supplement their wayward existences out of the pockets of innocent men. Even when they weren't presented as victimizers, however, the cessation of poor relief for illegitimate children was still considered the best way to put an end to bastardy because it was considered part and parcel of the larger problem, according to Thomas Malthus and like thinkers, namely that poor relief encouraged or failed to sufficiently discourage the having of more children than could be supported by the husband's and wife's wages.

This brings us to the issue of the "breadwinner wage" as an index for out relief. Again, prior to the New Poor Law, the practices of poor relief in different areas, at different seasons, and in different years were multiple and makeshift as a result of the nature of labor, especially in rural areas, especially as those areas were pressured by the slow and uneven process of the commodification of agricultural products. Over the century and a half or so, agrarian and rural

labor had become wage labor, but wages were not the only income (for lack of a better word) for the rural family. Men and women who worked were paid wages, but because those wages were often insufficient for supporting families, and because seasonal unemployment was a part of the cycle, the parishes supplemented the wages of the workers in multiple ways, including payments, food, care for the sick, etc. Wage supplements, as well as relief allowances for more than two children, were criticized as a means for keeping wages low. The argument of Malthusians and utilitarians was that as long as parishes supplemented men's wages (and encouraged families to grow too large) employers would never have to pay a "breadwinner wage," a wage sufficient for a man to support a family. On the other side of things, employers were interested in keeping the system of parish relief so that they could carry on paying all men the same wage, whether single or married. Some historians have seen in the idea of the "breadwinner wage" the subordination of women to patriarchal ideals because of the way it insists upon women being subordinate to men and reducing their sphere to the home. Marjorie Levine-Clark points out that "with the exception of mothers of 'bastard' children, women appeared in the New Poor Law primarily as dependents of men."<sup>390</sup> She argues that "women who applied for assistance from the New Poor Law were measured in terms of their relationship to male providers. Authorities assumed that the presence of an able-bodied father or husband was sufficient to keep a family afloat; yet this ideal was unrealistic, and family members who tried to live up to it often found themselves in the workhouse."<sup>391</sup>

Historian Anna Clark argues that such interpretations of the breadwinner wage is insufficient for discerning the real import of the New Poor Laws. At issue for Clark is

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<sup>390</sup> Marjorie Levine-Clark, "Engendering Relief: Women, Able-bodiedness, and the New Poor Law in Early Victorian England," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter), p. 110.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*



particularly the interpretation of the breadwinner wage as imposing new bourgeois ideals regarding the family and a woman's place in it onto working class men and women. Clark disputes the notion that working class women were expected to remain at home and be supported by their husbands, arguing that poor law reformers' "primary goal was not to ensure female dependence, but to relieve the government of the burden of supporting poor women and children."<sup>392</sup> To this end, the notion of the breadwinner wage was meant to be a deterrent to marriage and procreation, at least at the inception of the New Poor Law. Clark points out that there were "three very distinct understandings of the breadwinner wage [that] successively shaped nineteenth-century poor law policy," and the first understanding was of "the breadwinner wage as a rare privilege and responsibility."<sup>393</sup> Citing Malthus as the source for this idea, Clark tells us that he "wanted ministers to pronounce a warning at weddings that prospective husbands should be prepared to support all their children, and that the parish would not step in to prevent them from starvation."<sup>394</sup> So, the idea of a breadwinner wage was embraced as a standard to prevent men and women from marrying unless they could support a family. In this scheme, then, women were expected to work. And the new ideal was that working class men and women would remain mostly single and each would support him- or herself. Therefore, Clark explains, the New Poor Law was not so much designed to circumscribe women's sphere of work as it was designed "to make the head of the family, the husband and father, responsible for the maintenance of his own children, rather than the state."<sup>395</sup>

Clark's specific formulation somewhat obscures the combined functioning of the bastardy clauses and the new interest in the solidification of the husband/father-centered family.

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<sup>392</sup> Anna Clark, "The New Poor Law and the Breadwinner Wage: Contrasting Assumptions," *Journal of Social History*, Winter 2000, p. 261.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

It is somewhat of a misnomer to talk about the “state” as responsible for and burdened by the poor. Poor rates both before and after the New Poor Law were paid locally, not nationally; that is, landowners of a parish paid poor rates based on the amount of poor relief needed overall in the parish. The New Poor Law extended poor rates assessment regions beyond the parish in some places, creating what were known as “unions” of multiple parishes to relieve certain more pressured parishes and to prevent the manipulation of certain parish boundaries around only enclosed property. And so, one of the problems with the structure of poor relief from the point of view of the capitalist mode of production is that it still expressed and enacted older pre-capitalist conceptions of space and social relations. What the New Poor Law and the interests it served had to contend with was the incomplete territorialization of these older forms and conceptions by capitalism. For instance, putting pressure on the system of poor relief as it stood under the old Poor Law was the outdated system for assessing poor rates. Margaret Crowther points out that “the cost of poor relief was not growing faster than the population, nor than the national product in the 1820’s.”<sup>396</sup> Instead, “the trouble was that the cost fell unequally: parish responsibility for the local poor meant that impoverished parishes had a heavy burden while wealthier ones escaped more lightly,” a result of “the complex and antiquated system of assessment” which was unequal to the task of assessing poor rates against “absentee landlords and large commercial enterprises.”<sup>397</sup>

This uneven development illuminates the hegemonic function the image of the patriarchal family served. The combined function of the bastardy clauses and the new preference for relief given to men with families served to render all but those who existed within the male-centered

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<sup>396</sup> Margaret Anne Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 23.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

family invisible to social policy. This was especially the case when it came to single women, single women with children, and their children. More numerous participating in the industrial workforce and its political movements in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, women acting on their own in their own right were suddenly removed from public visibility with the New Poor Law. A whole swathe of the population was suddenly between institutions, left ultimately between the husband/father-centered family and the workhouse. However, the ruthlessness of such measures was masked by the rewriting of the place of the patriarchal family in English culture. In the discourse surrounding the New Poor Laws, the patriarchal family came to stand for old English and particularly rural English values.

### 3.2 NARRATING ENCLOSURE

Sited exactly in the landscape caught in this struggle between past institutions and structures of feeling and capitalist encroachment, *The Dead Secret* is a strange utopian tale of the transition, one that renders visible the forms of this historical negotiation. The heroine of the novel, Rosamond, has grown up as the daughter of Captain Treverton, an officer in the Royal Navy and master of the old dilapidated Cornish stately home Porthgenna Tower, but she is in fact the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Treverton's maid Sarah Leeson. Mrs. Treverton could not have children, something that the novel implies is related to her history as a "play-actress,"<sup>398</sup> a dubious and unseemly profession associated with all kinds of bodily impropriety according to the prejudices of the day. Sarah Leeson, her maid, on the other hand, has become pregnant out of wedlock. (Her fiancé, Hugh Polwheal, died in a mine accident just before they are to be

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<sup>398</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret* (New York: The Akadine Press, 1999), p. 4.

married.) Mrs. Treverton's solution is to pass off Sarah's child as her own, something they manage by going traveling together and swapping identities for the duration of the trip so that the pregnant Sarah Leeson appears to be the Lady, Mrs. Treverton, while Mrs. Treverton acts the part of the Lady's maid, a pair of disguises that anticipate and insure against inquiry.

Book One of the novel functions as a kind of prologue that presents these events. We enter the Treverton world when Rosamond is five years old and Mrs. Treverton is on her deathbed. Meanwhile, something, perhaps guilt, perhaps grief, has clearly taken its toll on Sarah; she is described as appearing to have "passed through the ordeal of some great suffering," her looks saying, "I am the wreck of something you might once have liked to see; a wreck that can never be repaired."<sup>399</sup> But a worse ordeal is soon to come. Beckoned to Mrs. Treverton's deathbed, she is compelled to write down for Mrs. Treverton her confession of the trick they have played on Captain Treverton. With Mrs. Treverton mustering all her histrionic prowess to compel Sarah to swear to her conditions for what to do with the letter, Sarah, a superstitious person and a nervous "wreck," cannot resist and submits to recording the confession and swearing to two of Mrs. Treverton's conditions. Under the threat that Mrs. Treverton "*will come to [her] from the other world,*"<sup>400</sup> Sarah swears that she "will not destroy the paper"<sup>401</sup> and that she "will not take the paper away with [her], if [she] leave[s] the house."<sup>402</sup> Mrs. Treverton dies, however, before she is fully able to utter or get Sarah to swear to the "third thing," though the broken words—"a third thing—your master—swear to give it"<sup>403</sup>—clearly mean that Sarah is to give the letter to Captain Treverton. It is something to which Sarah never swears, however; and, obeying the letter, rather than the spirit of the oath, hides the confession in a drawer, tucked in a

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., p. 14, 16; emphasis original.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

picture frame in a room in the unused North Tower. She also effectively seals off the wing by removing the labels from its keys so that no one will ever errantly explore the rooms. Because Sarah flees immediately after her mistress dies and she has hidden the letter, Rosamond grows up as if she was the legitimate daughter of Captain Treverton; but her mother, Sarah, does not fare so well. We learn later that she has been haunted by the ghost of Mrs. Treverton (or by her own conscience which appears in the form of Mrs. Treverton's ghost) from the day of Mrs. Treverton's death to the day we next meet Sarah (as the widowed Mrs. Jazeph) and will be haunted until the day she finally reveals to Rosamond the truth of their past.

Book Two begins with Rosamond's marriage to her lifelong friend, Leonard Frankland, who has gone blind as a result of spending too much time making and repairing watches. During the fifteen years between the first two Books, we learn, Porthgenna Tower has been all but uninhabited. Captain Treverton could not bear to be in the house after his wife's death; but Rosamond and Leonard plan to restore the house and make it their own home. A large portion of the rest of the novel follows their protracted absence from the estate. They honeymoon abroad in England and on the continent. Soon into their travels, however, they are notified of Captain Treverton's death at sea. This further extends their absence because they must postpone the necessary repairs to the estate and arrangements for their settlement during their bereavement. To balance the tragedy of the Captain's death soon comes another event that requires them to stop their journey—Rosamond's child is born (albeit healthy and strong) a month prematurely.

It is during this stop that Rosamond and her biological mother meet again, with the former unaware of the identity of the latter; and though Sarah wants to keep her identity a secret, she is haunted by her failure to reveal the secret when Rosamond was a child and before Captain Treverton was beyond reach to absolve her and cannot seem to control herself and continue to

protect the secret. When she meets Rosamond again, accidentally, as hired nurse for her and her baby, Sarah is soon compelled by her ghosts to speak to her. However, still wanting to protect Rosamond from the consequences of the truth, she only whispers ominously in Rosamond's ear that she should avoid "the Myrtle Room" when she finally returns to Porthgenna Tower.<sup>404</sup> It works on Rosamond the way all such injunctions do: she immediately determines to clear up "the mystery of the Myrtle Room."<sup>405</sup> Because Sarah had removed the labels from all the keys, though, it takes a while to discover which room in the Tower is the Myrtle Room; and its mystery does not get solved until near the end of the novel. Nevertheless, the rest of the novel can be read as Rosamond's journey toward the truth of her illegitimacy and toward the realization of her own, accidental, imposture.

This aspect of the plot prompts Tamar Heller to read the novel as an instance of the "female Gothic," which "maps a plot of domestic victimization."<sup>406</sup> While I disagree with the reading of *The Dead Secret* as a novel which exemplifies her definition of the female Gothic, Heller's conception of the relationship between narrative and space is yet important for understanding the novel. For Heller, the female Gothic is characterized by two important features: the representation of patriarchal authority as a spatial arrangement and the representation of female experience as a continually repressed and continually returning buried history. Of space, Heller writes: "the castles in which the heroines are imprisoned are nightmarish images of the home, and the coercive villains[,] versions of male authority figures."<sup>407</sup> Meanwhile, what moves the heroines through this space and deeper and deeper into it is a detective narrative of sorts in which the heroines try to follow the ghosts and traces of their

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<sup>404</sup> *The Dead Secret*, p. 153.

<sup>405</sup> *The Dead Secret*.

<sup>406</sup> Heller, p.2.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

female predecessors. The narrative, then, is generally “a narrative about mothers and daughters, in which a daughter who has lost her mother either discovers that she is not dead or finds mother substitutes in her place”<sup>408</sup>—a dubious legacy because the “discovery” of the lost mother “is also the symbolic revelation of both her mother’s and her own alienation and powerlessness.”<sup>409</sup>

What Heller does not address, however, is the fact that Rosamond’s “alienation” is so temporary as to be negligible and her dispossession of only slightly longer duration. It’s true that the reader’s suspense and the main plot are driven by the suspicion and the fear of the revelation of Rosamond’s true identity. Not only will the discovery that she is illegitimate cause her disinheritance but, we have also learned, threaten a rift between her and her husband. An incident early on in their honeymoon reveals Leonard to believe in the righteousness of “those distinctions in rank on which the whole well-being of society depends.”<sup>410</sup> While Rosamond reflects that “we don’t seem to have been created with such very wide distinctions between us” from the number of our limbs and our responses to hot and cold to the fact that “we have all got very much the same feelings whether we are high or whether we are low,” Leonard chides her for such “Radical” attitudes.<sup>411</sup> While Rosamond insists on her being essentially the same whether she “had been a duchess” or “a servant-girl,” Leonard insists on reaffirming her class distinction. He tells her that she is “not a servant-girl” and that she is “not so below a duchess as [she] seems to think”<sup>412</sup> but is rather almost better than someone of that rank because her “father’s family [...] is one of the oldest in England” and was “landed gentry when many a name in the peerage was not heard of.”<sup>413</sup> However, when the secret is revealed, all anxiety proves to

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

be groundless. Though Leonard admits that the “discovery *has* wounded [him] as only a proud man can be wounded,”<sup>414</sup> he tells her: ““High as I have always held the worth of rank in my estimation, I have learnt, even before the event of yesterday, to hold the worth of my wife, let her parentage be what it may, higher still.””<sup>415</sup> Leonard’s reaction and resignation to the fact of Rosamond’s parentage happens within the space of a few breathless minutes.

There is also little negative financial consequence. In a curious turn of events, by the time Rosamond and Leonard marry, the Porthgenna estate is Lenny’s not Rosamond’s. After Mrs. Treverton died, Captain Treverton decided to sell the entire estate of Porthgenna (which was not entailed), including “the house, the estate, the mine, and the fisheries.”<sup>416</sup> It was difficult to sell, however, because of “the ruinous state of the house, the bad cultivation of the land, legal difficulties in connection with the mine, and quarter-day difficulties in the collection of the rents,”<sup>417</sup> in short, because it’s a feudal relic. Meanwhile, living in the midlands, Captain Treverton meets and becomes friends with the Franklands, and Mr. Frankland, Leonard’s father, offers to buy the Porthgenna estate. The vicar who married Rosa and Lenny and who serves as chorus in the beginning of Book Two explains that Mr. Frankland was interested in the estate, despite its difficulties, because “his fortune had been made by trade, and he was foolish enough to be always a little ashamed of acknowledging that one simple and creditable fact.”<sup>418</sup> The vicar adds: “the truth was, that his ancestors had been landed gentry of importance, before the time of the Civil War, and the old gentleman’s great ambition was to sink the merchant in the

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<sup>414</sup> *The Dead Secret*, p. 363.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



landed grandee, and to leave his son to succeed him in the character of a Squire of large estate and great county influence.”<sup>419</sup> Hence the purchase of the Porthgenna estate.

Rosamond’s inheritance from Captain Treverton, the money from the sale of the estate, however, does need to be relinquished. This is initially of some consequence because of the condition of the house and its environs. Frankland, after purchasing the estate, had modernizing plans which the land and its inhabitants resisted to the tune of “thousands of pounds.”<sup>420</sup> And so, he returned to the midlands, leaving the house “to go to rack and ruin,” the way it had been “for more than fifty years past.”<sup>421</sup> Rosamond’s inheritance, had it been rightfully hers, would have balanced and righted some of the situation. The vicar explains:

‘The estate being entailed on Leonard, Captain Treverton’s daughter now goes back, in the capacity of mistress, to the house and lands which her father sold. Rosamond being an only child, the purchase-money of Porthgenna, which old Frankland once lamented as money thrown away, will now, when the Captain dies, be the marriage-portion of young Frankland’s wife.’<sup>422</sup>

To return this money to the rightful heir, then, does reduce the possibilities for the couple’s renewal of Porthgenna. They contact Captain Treverton’s estranged brother, who has a fortune of his own, to return the inheritance. However, in another felicitous twist, Andrew Treverton gives the inheritance back to Rosamond. A committed misanthrope and miser, Treverton nevertheless insists: “Take your money back again.” His reasons, he explains:

First, because you and your husband are the only two people I have ever met with who are not likely to be made rascals by being made rich. Secondly, because you

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

have told the truth, when letting it out meant losing money, and keeping it in, saving a fortune. Thirdly, because you are *not* the child of the player-woman. Fourthly, because you can't help yourself—for I shall leave it you at my death, if you won't have it now.<sup>423</sup>

And so, the novel ends with the precise happy ending predicted by the vicar.

In Heller's version of the female Gothic, (the) space (of the patriarchal home) is at odds with the narrative of female self-discovery and empowerment; the home is meant to contain, isolate, and disconnect female experience—women are locked in separate cells. In *The Dead Secret*, on the other hand, the narrative of female self-discovery is integral to the creation of domestic space. Without Rosamond's search for her identity, the home they inhabit at the end could not exist.

When the novel opens, Porthgenna is already a decaying, sepulchral space. The novel begins with and we are introduced to the house through Mrs. Treverton's last minutes, but her dying seems to resonate with an already funereal atmosphere. The servants are afraid to be alone in the middle of the night while Mrs. Treverton lies dying; Sarah, as already mentioned, looks like someone who has had a mortal shock—much is made in the beginning of the novel of her having such gray hair to contradict her youth, though her face also looks haggard. The North wing of the house is already unused. We learn that its rooms had long been “stripped of their finest pictures and their most valuable furniture, to assist in re-decorating the west rooms.”<sup>424</sup> Though it “had been originally built in the form of a square, and had been strongly fortified,” only the “heavy, low tower” remained.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

The outside view of the range of the north rooms, from the weedy, deserted garden below, showed plainly enough that many years had passed since any human creature had inhabited them. The window-panes were broken in some places, and covered thickly with dirt and dust in others. Here, the shutters were closed—there, they were only half-opened. The untrained ivy, the rank vegetation growing in fissures of the stone-work, the festoons of spiders' webs, the rubbish of wood, bricks, plaster, broken glass, rags, and strips of soiled cloth, which lay beneath the windows, all told the same tale of neglect. Shadowed by its position, this ruinous side of the house had a dark, cold, wintry aspect, even on [a] sunny August morning [...]<sup>426</sup>

It is a description designed to demonstrate that the Porthgenna house is mostly a thing of the past, a thing that life has moved through and left behind. It is *The Dead Secret's* equivalent to *Bleak House's* Dedlock estate.

The secret is not the source of the decay; it is rather the source of the house's survival. Although Sarah buried the letter that would reveal Rosamond's identity, she did not leave without letting Captain Treverton know that there was a secret. Captain Treverton had sent for her to hear what his wife's dying words were. This is what prompted Sarah to bury the secret and escape the house in the middle of the night. In her place, she leaves another letter "in which she confessed to having kept a secret from his knowledge which had been left in her charge to divulge; adding that she honestly believed no harm could come to him, or to any one in whom he was interested, by her failing to perform the duty entrusted to her."<sup>427</sup> Captain Treverton does head a search to find her, but to no avail. And, finding the idea of a secret being attached to his

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

wife's life and death too unsettling adds another reason for leaving Porthgenna. It is because they leave Porthgenna, that is, because of the secret, that it has a chance to be renewed. Having not grown up in the midst of its decay, Porthgenna represents the future, not the past, for Rosamond, and throughout the novel she longs only to get to Porthgenna Tower. And it is because of the "mystery of the Myrtle Room" that the North Tower sees the light of day again.

Before Leonard and Rosamond enter the Myrtle Room to investigate its mystery, the unexplored, undisclosed past is a source of terror. By virtue of its being unexplored, the past takes on supernatural form. Just as Mrs. Treverton's ghost is a sign of the unrevealed truth of the more immediate past, a ghost is said to haunt the North Tower. As they explore the Myrtle Room, however, it and the North Tower reveal only mundane ruin and decay. Doors in the room that inspire Rosamond with dread open, one onto another room, and the other onto a closet whose horrors are no more than "quantities of horrible, crawling brown creatures."<sup>428</sup> Otherwise the furniture in the room does not reward their suspicion "that the mystery of the Myrtle Room might be connected with hidden valuables that had been stolen, or hidden papers that ought to have been destroyed, or hidden stains and traces of some crime."<sup>429</sup> Once its threshold is braved, the room becomes only a room, like any other, that needs attention and repair. This deflation of the threats of the past is even presaged during a visit that Sarah makes to the house once she has involuntarily revealed to Rosamond that the Myrtle Room contains a secret. Before Rosamond and Leonard get to Porthgenna, Sarah enters the house on the pretense of being a stranger who has heard about it in a guidebook to Cornwall. Her intention is to enter the Myrtle Room and remove the letter, but she is overtaken by her fear of the ghost before she is able to enter the room. The narrator tells us:

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

If she could have moved at that moment; if she could have looked down to the line of open space between the bottom of the door and the flooring below, when the faintly rustling sound came nearest to her, she might have seen the insignificant cause that produced it lying self-betrayed under the door, partly outside, partly inside, in the shape of a fragment of faded red paper from the wall of the Myrtle Room.<sup>430</sup>

The suggestion is that the past is better revealed and investigated than ignored or repressed.

What the room does reveal is the secret of Rosamond's parentage; and instead of its being an even darker secret that undermines the foundations of the family, it is the secret that banishes all the threats and fears associated with the ancient past. In the end, it is the source of everyone's reconciliation. As already discussed, it brings Andrew Treverton back into the family. It also brings Rosamond and Sarah together again; and though Sarah is on her deathbed, she is finally released from her haunting and at peace when she dies. The close of the novel also registers Porthgenna's renewal. The "fine summer day" on which the novel ends is "the calmest and loveliest of the year." "The only clouds in the sky are clouds of shining white; the only shadows over the moor lie as light as down on the heather," Rosamond reports to her husband. She tells him that "it is such a different day from that day of dull oppression and misty heat when we found the letter in the Myrtle Room! Even the dark tower of our old house, yonder, looks its brightest and best, as if it waited to welcome us to the beginning of a new life."<sup>431</sup>

Were it not for the fact that Rosamond is illegitimate, the return to and renewal of Porthgenna would be a story of historical continuity in denial of the way that the capitalist division and distribution of labor and social relations are cutting across historical connections

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., p. 451.

and usurping seats of power. Rosamond's illegitimacy, on the other hand, makes this a story of enclosure, a story of the re-territorialization of feudal space by the bourgeois family.

Mr. Frankland's ability to buy but failure to successfully occupy Porthgenna registers the real problems associated with the transfer of power from feudal and post-feudal legal, social, and economic relations to capitalist ones. Because at every moment industrialization could release revolutionary energies, the transfer of power is an extremely vulnerable transaction. Therefore, so much of Victorian cultural production is about rendering the transfer of power invisible, about making it seem the bourgeoisie's inheritance. Mr. Frankland's mistake was to imagine that he could do what he liked with the Porthgenna estate and to attempt its modernization on that principle. The vicar who gives us all this information reports that "the feudal look of Porthgenna Tower, and the right over the mine and fisheries [...] flattered his notions of restoring the family greatness."<sup>432</sup> He imagined that "he and his son after him, could lord it [...] in a large scale, and direct at their sovereign will and pleasure, the hundreds of poor people, scattered along the coast, or huddled together in the little villages inland."<sup>433</sup> So, he bought the place and went to Cornwall with, the vicar says, "a tail of wiseacres from London at his heels."<sup>434</sup> All had plans for the improvement of the efficiency and management of the estate, plans based "on new scientific principles,"<sup>435</sup> but the scheme failed. His modern attitudes, including his sense that ownership gave him all the rights and privileges of the feudal lord, were met with more stone walls than the ones of the old estate: "his Cornish tenantry received him as an interloper."<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

The vicar concludes that the tenants “would have gone to the world’s end for the Trevertons; but not a man would move a step out of his way for the Franklands.”<sup>437</sup>

The estate cannot be properly occupied again until it is inherited. In terms of feudal continuity, by rights, the estate should be inherited by Captain Treverton’s brother or his male descendant. Because he doesn’t have a male descendant, it should go to his descendants through Rosamond (leaving aside for the moment the fact that Rosamond is not really his daughter). The estate, however, was not entailed, which is what made it available for purchase in the first place. Interestingly, though, Mr. Frankland entails it upon Leonard. He does so out of his pretensions to the claim of landed gentry; but in doing so, he picks up the tail, as it were, of the entail and attaches it to his own family. Legally, the estate has not gone one generation without its being entailed, even though its present entail is a bourgeois caprice and not a feudal legacy. The estate, then, has changed hands but, except for the smallest, almost invisible transaction, appears to remain the same.

Because Rosamond is not really Captain Treverton’s daughter, however, the Porthgenna estate at the end of the novel is not the same Porthgenna estate that opens the novel. It may be in the same geographical location, and it may be constructed of the very same stones and mortar; but in terms of the way that spaces and edifices exist in a cultural constellation that is the material form of distinct historical moments, the two Porthgenna estates are not the same. The Porthgenna estate at the beginning of the novel is a feudal ruin. If Rosamond were really the daughter of Captain Treverton, then the narrative that connects the two estates could be read as a story of redemption and renewal, where the legacy of the feudal estate continues in the present and will go on into the future. Because Rosamond is not Treverton’s daughter, the feudal line

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

does die out—historically speaking, it is an abandoned ruin, something supported by the fact that between the beginning and Rosamond’s return to Porthgenna, the house is treated as a museum to historical Cornwall. (Sarah is able to revisit the house on the pretense that she saw it listed in a guidebook.) At the end, it has been occupied and transformed by a bourgeois family who has no feudal ties to it. It is no longer a feudal estate but a bourgeois household that occupies the same site as that estate.

Between the first two books of the novel is a narrative disjunction that registers the historical disjunction between the two Porthgenna estates. The first book takes place at Porthgenna and covers the confession of the secret, the death of the lady of the manor, and the hiding of the secret. It ends with Sarah walking away from Porthgenna and embarking upon a new life definitively separated from life at Porthgenna. The final words of the book are: “Her master never saw her again; never heard of her again, after the morning of the twenty-third of August, eighteen hundred and twenty-nine.”<sup>438</sup> The second book begins abruptly, somewhere else and with new characters. The first words introduce a new space altogether: “The Church of Long Beckley (a large agricultural village in one of the midland counties of England)[...]”<sup>439</sup> And from there, we are introduced from afar to the strangers who are getting married at the church, strangers described to us but not named. It is a fairly disorienting leap.

Interestingly, the device used to get us invested in the scene of the marriage between Leonard and Rosamond with which Book Two opens is the construction of a detective-like perspective. After a detailed description of the church of Long Beckley comes the following:

At half-past seven o’clock, on a certain fine summer morning, in the year eighteen hundred and forty-four, if any observant stranger had happened to be standing in

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 41.



some unnoticed corner of the churchyard, and to be looking about him with sharp eyes, he would probably have been the witness of proceedings which might have led him to believe that there was a conspiracy going on in Long Beckley, of which the church was the rallying-point, and some of the most respectable inhabitants the principal leaders.<sup>440</sup>

It goes on like this, revealing all the details of the morning as if they were clues to some conspiracy, until the hypothetical observant stranger discovers that “the bond which united the conspirators at that early hour of the morning was of the hymeneal sort, and that the object of their plot was to celebrate a wedding in the strictest secrecy.”<sup>441</sup>

As much as this seems to be the beginning of a new line—a new family line and a new narrative line—the conspiracy/detection device obscures its abruptness. With the idea that there is a conspiracy, however farcical it turns out to be, we are compelled to read on in order to discover in the future what happened in a past that is at present inaccessible to us. What the detective device does is introduce a mysterious past to give significance to, and hold a place of potential meaning for, the present events. It also opens up a space of excess or remainder between the past that we know and the past that functions as the origin to this particular narrative thread. It does not connect the present and the specific past we have been reading about but its gesture toward a past that is not yet revealed promises some kind of connection as yet undisclosed. Writ large, this is the structure of the narrative and provides a narrative model of bourgeois re-territorialization.

The key to this is the way that the secret functions as a pseudo-inheritance for Rosamond and Leonard; but in order to understand this, we have to focus on their story apart from the secret

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

for a moment. On their own, Rosamond and Leonard are a bourgeois couple, somewhat untethered except that their fetishization of the past gives them a purpose. In the first place, they both fetishize Rosamond's past. As we have seen, Leonard's sentimental connection to Rosamond is almost equaled by his sentimental connection to her "father's family"— "one of the oldest in England" and "landed gentry when many a name in the peerage was not heard of."<sup>442</sup> Rosamond's connection to her past has to do with the few fond memories she has of her childhood before her mother died; but she also has a generalized sensational notion of old houses—she is excited by the prospect of "see[ing] ghosts, and find[ing] treasures, and hear[ing] mysterious noises [...]"<sup>443</sup> In whatever way, it is the lure of the past that gives them purpose. To return to Porthgenna and renew the house is the only project we ever know of them having for the future at the same time that their present is only a deferral of that future.

However, while they are lured by the past in a general way, their impulse is also to erase it to some extent. Before the secret makes its own claims on them (when Sarah tells them not to enter the Myrtle Room), Rosamond's intent is to renew the house to such an extent that her father will forget the past and be able to retire and live there with them. The goal is to "so alter the look of the place to [her father's] eyes as to dissipate his old sorrowful associations with it,"<sup>444</sup> including the memory of Sarah's confession that she was keeping a secret from him. Rosamond feels sure that if they "give him a new north garden at Porthgenna" and "new north rooms to live in,"<sup>445</sup> this will be enough to erase the past. What it is important to note, then, is that their plans to transform Porthgenna are licensed with reference to a feudal and paternal

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

legacy. In the person of Captain Treverton, the past and the present are still connected in a living person and so it is less crucial to hold onto the past's abandoned artifacts.

It is no accident that the secret reasserts itself once Captain Treverton dies at sea—it picks up and replaces the feudal/paternal continuity. Rosamond's and Leonard's plan is still to renovate the North Wing, but the additional purpose of uncovering its mysteries re-inspirits the plan, replacing the continuity lost with the death of Captain Treverton with another connection to the history of the place. Difficult to understand is that before the secret is uncovered, it is not as necessary as it becomes once it is uncovered; it is a supplementary connection to the past that exists alongside of Rosamond's own connection to Porthgenna. Once the truth of Rosamond's parentage is uncovered, however, the secret becomes the central and necessary connection to the past, the secret not its revelation. When we learn that Rosamond is neither the Captain's nor Mrs. Treverton's daughter, we discover that she has no legitimate connection to the history of the estate. Or rather, that is what we would discover were it not for the role the secret itself plays. Strictly speaking, Rosamond has no legitimate connection to the history of the Trevertons; and this means, or would mean, that one thread of the story, the narrative equivalent of inheritance, the movement through time from past to future in a continuous line—Rosamond's and Leonard's marriage and family life as no more and no less purposeful than its participation in lineage itself—is cut off, leaving both the young couple and the Porthgenna estate where they were at the beginning of the novel: disconnected, one with no future and the other with no past.

This is not quite what happens, however, because of the way the secret functions to open up another narrative line that shadows and ultimately replaces the one that participates in historical continuity. What is the secret but a remainder or an excess in relationship to the past? It is a blank space, an un-narrated, unhistorical space, an aporia. It isn't a line out of the past, but

it is that which suggests there are other lines than those already known of. It does not yet multiply lineages but it does prevent the closure and the finitude of the past. So, when Rosamond discovers that she is not Treverton's daughter and so has no filial claim on the Treverton history and the Treverton estate, it does not matter as much as it would if the only form of legitimacy in operation were the feudal, the paternal, the familial, and the historical. There are two kinds of right to the property that might potentially be in competition. There is the feudal right—as a Treverton, if she were a Treverton, Rosamond would have a claim on the estate that could be threatened by the revelation of her true parentage. This is obviated, however, by the fact that Leonard already owns the estate and holds a new legal right to it. In this respect, Rosamond's status as counterfeit or forgery is just as good as her filial connection.

Through the secret, she has a narrative connection to the estate that functions almost as an inheritance would. This is demonstrated in the scene of the letter's discovery. The letter's location is interesting. Before they find it, they also find a box filled with the papers of one of Captain Treverton's ancestors. Even though its seal and the lore of old papers in general might suggest it contains some important or revealing document, an alternate Will or a confession of some crime, the box turns out to be full of miscellaneous testaments to everyday life: “a collection of old bills, old notes of invitation, old doctor's prescriptions,” and so on.<sup>446</sup> The mundane quality of this collection throws into relief the discovery of the letter but also comments on its status. The letter is also an old family paper in so far as it is the confession of Mrs. Treverton; and though it testifies to Rosamond's illegitimacy as a Treverton, it also paradoxically gives her a place in the history of the family. Moreover, no one else is in competition for that place; she has not supplanted anyone else's position because there would be

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

no empty space of a daughter without her own existence. So while the revelation of the secret negates her inheritance, it nevertheless gives her a provenance. As such it falls in line with a new version of legitimacy; it is a form of authentication that is particular to the expropriated, to that which is in circulation.

### 3.3 NARRATING, EXPLOITING THE FEMALE LEGACY

Of the novel, Heller writes: “In spite of its absence of villainous males, *The Dead Secret* is one of Collins’ purest examples of the classic Radcliffean plot,” which is, again, “a plot of female victimization” where “the castles in which the heroines are imprisoned are nightmarish images of the home, and the coercive villains versions of male authority figures.”<sup>447</sup> The problem with this account is the insistence on the continuity of (a generalized notion of) patriarchy even in its palpable absence. Not only are there no “villainous males” in the novel, for all intents and purposes, there is no male agency in the novel. There is especially no paternal agency. Both Mr. Frankland and Captain Treverton are broken men in one way or another. Frankland’s plans to renew Porthgenna and create a paternal legacy fail and leave him defeated. Treverton has been broken by his wife’s death as well as by the sense that something about her death is beyond his power to understand. Moreover, both fathers die before Rosamond and Leonard reach Porthgenna again. (Mr. Frankland dies some time before the story opens onto the couple’s wedding.) Leonard, meanwhile, has extremely limited agency because of his blindness, although he is occasionally paternalistic in his attitude toward Rosamond. Indeed, the treatment of Leonard’s blindness seems to be carefully contrived to give Rosamond the only real agency in

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<sup>447</sup> Heller, p. 2.

the novel. In fact, it is the nature of Rosamond's agency that forces us to rethink the narrative exploration of female identity and female lines of relationship and their place in the fabrication of bourgeois domestic space.

Ultimately, Rosamond is enclosed within Porthgenna again and becomes the center of her new bourgeois family. Without the elements that make up the plot—the disturbances caused by the intimation of a dark secret, the investigation it compels, and the re-signification in which it results—nothing appears to have happened from beginning to end in terms of the structure of power. Rosamond is at the center of life at Porthgenna, and she is its animating spirit, at the same time that she has no legal claim on the house. As in many other Collins novels, it appears that despite the plot's complications and convolutions, structurally speaking, nothing much has happened. On the contrary, what has happened is precisely the reconfiguration and re-signification of all that was originally there; and the process by which this is achieved is the piecing together of the fragments of the stories of women.

Indeed, one way to understand the construction or plan of the novel is as an alternative account of the history of patriarchy, an account of the succession of women that it would otherwise render invisible. Interestingly, the letter that reveals Rosamond's true parentage, which was dictated and signed by Mrs. Treverton and written and witnessed by Sarah Leeson, is found tucked in a picture frame behind a portrait of a lady who was said to be the very image of the ghost that haunted the North Tower. The portrait is probably of some distant ancestor of Captain Treverton (though "nobody knew how old it was or when it came into the house") that the most recent Mrs. Treverton wanted destroyed "because the painted face had a strange likeness to hers."<sup>448</sup> Symbolically then, all the women associated with the lineage of Porthgenna

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<sup>448</sup> *The Dead Secret*, p. 435.

are brought together in a way that begs for narrative and points to gaps in the estate's history. What is the connection between the late Mrs. Treverton and the ancestor who resembles her so much? It is a question that cannot be answered, a question whose answer is lost to history. There is no way to recover that lost connection if there is a connection. The women's lives have not been recorded with such attention while the men's lives have been so important as to make the records of their everyday existence sanctified objects.

At the same time, women's narration is what ultimately re-interprets life at Porthgenna. Collins exaggerates the limitations of Leonard's blindness to such an extent that almost everything about the house has to be described and narrated by Rosamond. And Rosamond's narratorial control over Leonard's perception reaches its height when they enter the Myrtle Room. When they first enter the room, Rosamond is briefly caught up in the suspense of it and forgets to tend her husband, remembering him only to be remonstrated with a pathetic image: "His face, so quiet and composed at other times, expressed doubt and uneasiness now. His disengaged hand was outstretched, and moving backwards and forwards, up and down, in the vain attempt to touch something which might enable him to guess at the position in which he was placed."<sup>449</sup> She quickly reacts and tells him not to grope blindly because "it looks as if [he] had forgotten that [she] was with [him]" and "as if [he] were left alone and helpless."<sup>450</sup> She asks him: "what need have you of your sense of touch, when you have got *me*?"<sup>451</sup> It is an interaction that registers Rosamond's control over him even though it is posed as her selfless commitment to being his eyes and hands. And his helplessness without Rosamond is confirmed at two other times in the scene. At one point, they discover a *bas relief* on the fireplace that Leonard tries to

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

“read” with his fingertips. He reports what he thinks the sculpture depicts only to be corrected completely and condescendingly by Rosamond.<sup>452</sup> Likewise, after Rosamond reads the letter (and is, by the way, in complete control of whether or not to divulge its contents), she goes silent with the shock; because she does not respond when he calls to her, he tries to move toward her on his own, “moving his poor, helpless, wandering hands” to no avail, and “str[ikes] his knee sharply against [a chair]” that is in his way.<sup>453</sup>

Heller notes but considers as short-lived Rosamond’s control over the story. She focuses on the way that Rosamond explicitly entertains the notion of herself as a writer. After she has read the letter herself, she is tortured by the idea of how to tell Lenny. She finally hits upon the idea of pretending that she is going to write a novel. “Why not?” she thinks to herself; “more women write novels now than men.”<sup>454</sup> And she begins telling the story of their life from the point of view of the revelation she has just had. For Heller, however, the kind of female agency in relationship to the story that this might represent is “subsumed within a domestic plot suitable for publication in Dickens’ respectable *Household Words*.”<sup>455</sup> My disagreement with this argument is that it does not take into account how much Rosamond’s story is central to the construction of the domestic settlement that exists at the end.

This is not to say that the novel is therefore one that provides an alternative model to female subjugation in and by domesticity. One of the reasons Collins is seen as raising hopes and ultimately failing to deliver satisfaction vis-à-vis his treatment of his heroines is that the centrality of female characters and their experience is mistaken for an investment in female elevation and liberation for its own sake. To read the novel with this assumption is to inevitably

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>455</sup> Heller, p. 8.



see its project fail as Porthgenna and the duties of wife and mother close around Rosamond. What we thus fail to see, however, is the usefulness of narratives of female experience in the project of authenticating bourgeois domesticity. Rosamond's story is the unwritten story of female succession that functions as an alternative history available for adoption by new social configurations. Or rather, it is not so much an alternative history in the positive sense but a cipher, a secret, and a blank to be exploited.

#### 4.0 DETECTING INNOCENCE IN *THE MOONSTONE*

*“If he could have recovered in a complete state of oblivion as to the past, he would have been a happier man. Perhaps we should all be happier,” [Ezra Jennings] added, with a sad smile, “if we could but completely forget.”*

-- The Moonstone<sup>456</sup>

*“A déjà vu is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something.”*

-- The Matrix<sup>457</sup>

Now that we have come to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, the novel traditionally received as the first (for, now we know better than to say “origin”) of the genre, it is Trinity's explanation of déjà vu in *The Matrix* that best begins (and ends) our study. Neo, who has not yet understood the full implications of what he has learned about the Matrix, the computer generated synæsthesia that he and his fellow slaves have taken for reality, says, “Whoa, déjà vu,” after watching a black cat cross a doorway in front of him and then watching ‘another’ black cat do the same. Paradoxically, Neo is still comfortable with the sensation of déjà vu, no matter how uncanny the feeling may be, because he still has not habituated himself to the recognition that what he takes to be external and separate reality is a mental projection of images whose reality lies only in a series of numbers and electronic pulses, a fact that makes the experience of déjà vu a significant

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<sup>456</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, Ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 365.

<sup>457</sup> *The Matrix*, Dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 1999.

and, again paradoxically, real event. In everyone else on Morpheus's team, Neo's words create panic. All of the team go into action, ready for an attack, while Trinity interrogates Neo. She asks him, "What did you see?" Neo tells her, "A black cat went past us, and then another just like it." To which Trinity responds, "How much like it? Was it the same cat?" And finally, in response to his confusion, she explains: "A déjà vu is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something."

In the Matrix, déjà vu is not a personal sensation but an actual repetition that is the result of the program resetting the reality they inhabit or the reality that inhabits them. And so, far from adjusting oneself to the minor glitches that briefly unsteady one's sense of organic continuity, one must attend carefully to such brief glimpses of disjuncture. In fact, in the Matrix, it is far better not only to heed the sense of déjà vu (or the experience formerly known as déjà vu) but to deliberately cultivate it. In so far as the glimpse, the glitch, is the only reminder that the Matrix is not real, then forcing the experience of simultaneous repetition against every apparently solid reality is the key to undoing the effects of the Matrix's illusions. To cultivate this sense that in repetition is hidden an erasure of a former reality, and further, that in identicalness is an erased glimpse of repetition is, for Neo, the key to surviving as it is the key to understanding the constructed nature of the illusions that, nevertheless, have the power to kill him. What Neo must learn is to un-see the apparently solid objects of the Matrix; and this is what Morpheus refers to when he explains to Neo that it is not that he will be able to eventually "dodge bullets" but that, "when [he's] ready, [he] won't have to."

Seeing the repetitions that erstwhile create the illusions of solidity and permanence in selfsameness is likewise a vital practice for understanding *The Moonstone* both with and against its reification as the first and paradigmatic detective novel—understanding *The Moonstone* in

relationship to the genre it purportedly brings into being; understanding *The Moonstone*, after Benjamin, as the consummation of the generic “form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history”<sup>458</sup>; and understanding *The Moonstone* as itself an elaborate system of repetitions.

First, the glimpse of a hidden repetition in selfsameness provides a useful counterpoint to the kind of identity established between genre and original or paradigmatic text as that articulated by Tzvetan Todorov in his account of “The Typology of Detective Fiction.”<sup>459</sup> “As a rule,” writes Todorov, “the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction,” Todorov continues, “has its norms; to ‘develop’ them is to disappoint them: to ‘improve upon’ detective fiction is to write ‘literature’, not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of genre, but the one which conforms to them.”<sup>460</sup> Though, for my purposes here, the obvious high cultural prejudice of the statement is unimportant, what is of interest is the relative distribution of excess and necessity that Todorov uses to make the distinction between the literary work and the generic work. The literary work is pure singularity, one which may end up founding a genre but which is not derivative or governed by rules of engagement, so to speak. If we recall Fredric Jameson’s claim that “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact,”<sup>461</sup> then according to Todorov’s statement, literature is anarchic, pure excess, without obligations. Meanwhile, the

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<sup>458</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>459</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 42-52.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>461</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 137; original emphasis.

work of genre is entirely governed by necessity, a work that only exists to fulfill the generic contract, a work in which excess or something other could only be a breach.

It is true that Todorov is talking about judgment and value in relationship to our reasons for reading and expectations of the different modes of literary production and so is not denying that, in practice, the work of genre may exceed that which is necessary while the work of literature may fail to be purely self-identical. However, what matters here are the different logical operations required to establish the relationship between the cultural artifact and its type. Of the work of literature, Todorov writes:

The major work creates, in a sense, a new genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre. The genre of *The Charterhouse of Parma*, that is, the norm to which this novel refers, is not the French novel of the early nineteenth century; it is the genre “Stendhalian novel” which is created by precisely this work and a few others. One might say that every great book establishes the existence of two genres, the reality of two norms: that of the genre it transgresses, which dominated the preceding literature, and that of the genre it creates.<sup>462</sup>

According to this formulation, then, the logical operation by which the abstract formal character of the novel is ascertained is through a process of deduction where the individual work contains the given set of first principles. This deductive process is followed differently when it comes to the individual work that is deemed a work of genre. In this case, we might say that the genre’s rules and conventions are induced from the individual generic work; however, it is rather the

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<sup>462</sup> Todorov, p. 43.

case that the rules of the genre are treated as the *a priori* facts from which the individual work can be deduced.

The question is, however, *when* is genre in this schema? Looking back over his discussion of the literary work and how it can give rise to a genre, we note that the literary work belongs to history; the literary work exists in a timeline and marks a new era (on a small scale); its appearance creates a before and an after. When it comes to understanding the work of genre, on the other hand, it is as if genre does not exist in history but lies outside of time. As a result, Todorov's attempt to trace the development of the detective story from the "whodunit" to the "thriller" to the novel of suspense must deal with different genres "within detective fiction"<sup>463</sup> *over* time instead of being able to account for a mechanism of change.

Though ultimately untenable from a historical materialist point of view, Todorov's formulation is interesting for how it exposes a certain habit of reading and thinking about generic texts or of reading and thinking about texts as generic. Telling is Todorov's bold claim that "if we had properly described the genres of popular literature, there would no longer be an occasion to speak of its masterpieces. They are one and the same thing; the best novel will be the one about which there is nothing to say."<sup>464</sup> This makes sense, however, only if we are reading for the way the text conforms to the rules. Yet, if it is possible for texts to be generic without perfectly expressing the form of the genre, then we must have in mind a conception of difference and deviation in relationship to those rules; indeed, the rules are abstractions that may function to distinguish acceptable variation and general compliance from transgression. So, to consider, or even to have an ideal conception of, a text as without variation in relationship to the rules is only to supplant the particularity of the work with the identity of its generic status.

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

Todorov's thesis, then, is incompatible with the project of tracing the political unconscious through its narrativization. However, because Todorov articulates an extreme version of the relationship between a genre and its "masterpieces," he makes visible a fairly common effect of generic concepts. Like any conception of structure in a literary work, the idea of genre governs the selection of relevant aspects of the work while leaving other aspects alone. Unlike other interpretative maps, however, the idea of generic conventions effectively renders heterogeneity invisible. If a text's identification as generic has to do with its achievement of a set of basic conditions, arrangements, and outcomes, then what makes the text singular, those details that are not prescribed or described by the rules of the genre, are rendered irrelevant, treated either as the means to achieve the end that is whatever convention is at issue or as the ornamentation that remains extraneous in relationship to the necessary features. To historicize genre, on the other hand, means attending to the details that might otherwise seem irrelevant or non-vital. These details may indicate the heterogeneity that results from genre's movement through history and history's movement through genre.

Attending to the way that reading a text as identical to genre tends to erase difference and excess is crucial when it comes to studying the traces of the political unconscious in the detective narrative through a study of *The Moonstone*, especially in so far as *The Moonstone* is so often considered to be the origin of the detective novel. If the detective narrative is the tolerable "form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world," then *The Moonstone*, as one of the original works in which that form debuts as *the* form of the work, has to be understood, to use Benjamin's language again, as constituted by "process[es] of becoming and disappearance."<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 45.

The ability of generic constructs to effectively erase the historicity of genre appears in particularly stark relief with respect to *The Moonstone*'s career. Though it is generally accepted to be the "prototypical detective novel,"<sup>466</sup> thanks mainly to T. S. Eliot's treatment of it as "the first and greatest of English detective novels,"<sup>467</sup> it has nevertheless been retroactively overwritten by what is meant to be the very form derived from it. This is especially noticeable in D. A. Miller's analysis of the novel. In his essay, "From *roman policier* to *roman-police*: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*," Miller offers the following description of the novel: "It is not difficult to recognize that *The Moonstone* begins by invoking and observing the norms of detective fiction. Rachel Verinder's Indian diamond has been stolen, and her mother, Lady Julia, has 'no alternative but to send for the police'."<sup>468</sup> What is interesting about this description is that this is not exactly how *The Moonstone* begins; this is how the part of the novel that has been received by history as the original detective novel begins, but the novel itself begins nearly 50 years earlier with an account of "The Storming of Seringapatam." And, far from irrelevant in relationship to the subject of detective fiction, this story, presented to us in the form of an excerpt "from a family paper,"<sup>469</sup> is itself a story of crime.

In the interests of maintaining the "good opinion" of some "members of [his] family," who have "misinterpreted" the reasons the unnamed letter-writer "has [been] induced to refuse the right hand of friendship to [his] cousin, John Herncastle," he decides, finally, to explain himself.<sup>470</sup> And so, he begins his part of the story of "the storming of Seringapatam, under

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<sup>466</sup> A. D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction," *Wilkie Collins: Contemporary Critical Essays*, Ed. Lyn Pykett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp.175-196: 175.

<sup>467</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 413.

<sup>468</sup> D. A. Miller, "From *roman policier* to *roman-police*: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*," *Wilkie Collins: Contemporary Critical Essays*, Ed. Lyn Pykett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 197-220: 200.

<sup>469</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 1.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*



General Baird, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, 1799,” at which time “the private difference between [his] cousin and [him] took its rise.”<sup>471</sup> He explains that, prior to this event, a rumor about the Palace of Seringapatam’s great “treasure in jewels and gold,” and specifically about the story of “a Yellow Diamond—a famous gem in the native annals of India,”<sup>472</sup> had been circulating in the camp.

The earliest known traditions describe the stone as having been set in the forehead of the four-handed Indian god who typifies the Moon. Partly from its peculiar colour, partly from a superstition which represented it as feeling the influence of the deity whom it adorned, and growing and lessening in lustre with the waxing and waning of the moon, it first gained the name by which it continues to be known in India to this day—the name of THE MOONSTONE.<sup>473</sup>

Attached to the rumor of this diamond in the camp is the history and/or myth of its transference from one area to another as the result of various military struggles. The salient feature of the story is that, at some point in the Moonstone’s history as a spoil of war, “Vishnu the Preserver appeared to the three Brahmins [who had been guarding it and seeing it safely back to Benares] in a dream” and commanded “that the Moonstone should be watched, from that time forth, by three priests in turn, night and day, to the end of the generations of men.”<sup>474</sup> Also attached to this myth is the threat that “the presumptuous mortal who laid hands on the sacred gem, and to all of his house and name who received it after him,” would be struck by “certain disaster.”<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

The unnamed letter-writer continues to recount how the story left “no serious impression on any of [them] except his cousin—whose love of the marvellous induced him to believe it.”<sup>476</sup> And so, his cousin, Herncastle, vowed that they would find the Moonstone when they stormed the city, which he, indeed, does. Having become separated from him during the battle, the letter-writer finally re-encounters Herncastle in the treasury of the Palace after it had been secured. He had come in response to cries coming from the treasury, and arrives to find “the bodies of two Indians [...] lying across the entrance, dead” and “a third Indian, mortally wounded, [...] sinking at the feet of a man whose back was towards [him].”<sup>477</sup> “The man turned at the instant when I came in,” recalls the writer, “and I saw John Herncastle, with a torch in one hand, and a dagger dripping with blood in the other.”<sup>478</sup>

A stone, set like a pommel, in the end of the dagger’s handle, flashed in the torchlight as he turned on me, like a gleam of fire. The dying Indian sank to his knees, pointed to the dagger in Herncastle’s hand, and said, in his native language:--“The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!”<sup>479</sup>

When they meet again the next morning, the letter-writer demands an explanation of Herncastle instead of shaking his hand in greeting. He asks Herncastle to tell him “how the Indian in the armoury met his death” and what his “last words meant, when he pointed to the dagger in [Herncastle’s] hand.”<sup>480</sup> Herncastle answers the question in a way that evades his responsibility for the death and the identity of the stone in the dagger, lying to his cousin, who once and for all “turned [his] back on him.”<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

The letter-writer concludes his account with the caution that its contents are “for the information of the family only.”<sup>482</sup> He has no proof with which he can go to his commanding officer; and, he admits, “I have no evidence but moral evidence to bring forward.”<sup>483</sup> He writes: “I have not only no evidence that he killed the two men at the door; I cannot even declare that he killed the third man inside—for I cannot say that my own eyes saw the deed committed.”<sup>484</sup> Finally, while he “attach[es] no sort of credit to the fantastic Indian legend of the gem,” the letter-writer ends by acknowledging his “conviction [...] that crime brings its own fatality with it.”<sup>485</sup> He is, therefore, “not only persuaded of Herncastle’s guilt” but is “even fanciful enough to believe that he will live to regret it, if he keeps the Diamond; and that others will live to regret taking it from him, if he gives the Diamond away.”<sup>486</sup>

This prophesy is proven true enough when, 50 years later, Rachel Verinder, John Herncastle’s niece, receives the Diamond, according to his bequeath, on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. It is her cousin, and soon-to-be suitor, Franklin Blake who is charged with the task of delivering the jewel to her, but he has serious misgivings about the rightness of the inheritance. Because of the family letter which constitutes the Prologue, along with other reports of Herncastle’s character and activities, Herncastle had spent the remainder of his days being shunned by the family. On one occasion, ostensibly attempting to reconcile with his sister, Rachel’s mother (Lady Verinder, née Herncastle), Herncastle visits their house in London on the night of Rachel’s birthday. He insists that Betteredge, the faithful steward, tell Lady Verinder that he has “‘called to wish [his] niece many happy returns of the day’.”<sup>487</sup> He is once again rebuffed and vows that he “‘shall

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

remember [his] niece's birthday'.<sup>488</sup> The result is that he bequeaths the Diamond to Rachel, presumably believing that the curse will likewise be transferred to Rachel, a motive which seems confirmed by the conditions of the Will. Blake reads Betteredge the relevant clause: “‘Thirdly, and lastly, I give and bequeath to my niece, Rachel Verinder, daughter and only child of my sister, Julia Verinder, widow—if her mother, the said Julia Verinder, shall be living on the said Rachel Verinder's next Birthday after my death—the Yellow Diamond belonging to me, and known in the East by the name of The Moonstone’.”<sup>489</sup> It is the codicil that makes the bequeath suspicious as it suggests that Herncastle's aim is to punish his sister by endangering his niece.

The Diamond is stolen that very night—not by a band of vengeful Brahmin priests, but by a member of the family; and the confusion, silence, and family division the theft causes seem to be, in their turn, not so much the righteous vengeance of a violated god but more the petty cruelty of a poisonous ancestor.

Viewed as a detective novel that officially begins with the theft of the Diamond on the night of Rachel's birthday, this Prologue could easily be read as background matter and as sensational adornment. The Prologue gives the all too mundane and worldly story of a theft some flare, perhaps, and a touch of orientalist exoticism. At best, it might be said to be slightly more functional in terms of narrative structure, and specifically the narrative structure of a detective novel, in so far as it provides a red herring—there is a brief period after the theft is discovered when the household acts on the assumption that the Diamond was stolen by the three South Asian men, whom they assume to be the three Hindu priests of legend, because they have been seen in the vicinity nearest the Verinder house and grounds.

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

Viewing it as a Wilkie Collins novel, however, we are led to a different sense of the letter's, and therefore the Prologue's, significance. A piece of writing lost, stolen, or buried in the vicinages of the past lies at the center of the plots of several of his novels. We have seen this to be the case in *The Dead Secret*. In *No Name*, it is the father's will undone by a legal technicality, the written amendment to another Vanstone Will, and a letter conveying a legal matter—in short, the movement of legal significance in the circulation of documents, that constitutes the plot. Laura Fairlie's salvation in *The Woman in White* depends upon recovering and authenticating written accounts of her journey from her nefarious husband's home to London, these written accounts hopefully useful in refuting the official document of her death certificate. Meanwhile, the defeat of her husband's claims to her inheritance depends upon the exposure of his illegitimate birth. The hero of the novel, Walter Hartwright, discovers that Sir Percival Glyde had had the church registry forged to record the non-existent marriage of his mother and father. The forgery is discovered through a comparison of two church registers, one forged, and one copied before the forgery. The list goes on.

In turn, this list serves to highlight another feature of many Collins novels, one exemplified in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Not far from the solution that *Bleak House* finds to the machinations of a moribund legal system, both of these novels are deliberately posed as authentic narratives meant to both oppose and replace legal documents. This is made most explicit in Hartwright's framing of *The Woman in White*. Even though Laura is freed from her husband with his death, much of the mystery has been cleared up, and the story of Laura's trials has been completely gone over, we learn that Walter, her savior and now husband, has been writing under an assumed name and amending others' narratives in the story to disguise the true identity of himself, Marion Halcombe, and Laura Fairlie. We learn that Laura's identity as

herself has not been officially recognized; and, therefore, we realize that the whole narrative has been one meant to amend the official record. Hartwright explains:

If the machinery of Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice.

But the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse; and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place. As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence[....]

Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offense against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect[....]<sup>490</sup>

It is a framing that foregrounds narrative's potential to compete with official history.

*The Moonstone* is similarly constructed. The idea of telling the story of the theft of the Diamond is Blake's, and he explains to Betteredge the proper way of proceeding. Betteredge reports Blake's explanation:

“We have certain events to relate,” Mr Franklin proceeded; “and we have certain persons concerned in those events who are capable of relating them. Starting from these plain facts, the idea is that we should all write the story of the

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<sup>490</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), p. 3.

Moonstone in turn—as far as our own personal experience extends, and no farther.”<sup>491</sup>

The one difference between *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*—and it is the difference that makes all the difference with respect to the detective narrative—is that *The Moonstone* presents this particular family paper as somewhat separate from the other family document that is the writing of the story and the novel (minus the Prologue and Epilogue).

When we view the novel as the first detective novel, its place in the Collins corpus and the features that are significant to its identification as such become rearranged and redefined so that what would seem important if the novel’s context were other Collins novels become less so when the novel’s context is the genre of detective fiction. Indeed, thanks to the common sense distinction between literature and genre illuminated by Todorov’s differential conceptions of the generic work and the literary work, we can even see why it had to be *Collins* and not Dickens who *could* become ‘the father of the detective novel’. Because Dickens was already an author of Literature whose novels could therefore be discussed as *generically* Dickensian, the nascent narrative strategy for expressing a historical consciousness that appears in *Bleak House* and can be discussed as an ur-detective narrative structure could only be incidental to the essential Dickensian narrative paradigm. By contrast, because Collins is not considered an author of Literature whose novels can be read as essentially ‘Collinsian’, *The Moonstone* effectively has no context until its own form is objectified as the first detective novel. As a result, the apparently objective process of literary historiography is, in fact, the further ratification of the culture’s judgments regarding literary value.

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<sup>491</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 8.

This is to say that *The Moonstone* is at least two texts when it is considered the first detective novel. It is itself and, as such, its identity and essentiality is a mystery or at least an open question; and it is itself objectified as the original detective narrative. Because it is received not just as *a* detective novel but as *the* detective novel, it has what Marx calls a “sublime objectivity”<sup>492</sup>—every aspect of it is consecrated without being revealed, which is to say that every aspect of the novel could potentially contain the essence of the detective narrative and yet there is no standard against which to judge any aspect of it. We see this effect in Eliot’s unexpected definition of the detective narrative via *The Moonstone* as one in which there is not much emphasis on detection and the detective. Distinguishing the interest of Collins’ novel from what he considers to be the signature of Poe’s work, which he deems “as specialized and as intellectual as a chess problem,” Eliot writes of “the best English detective fiction” that it “has relied less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on the intangible human element.”<sup>493</sup> It is this, for Eliot, that characterizes the “genre invented by Collins and not by Poe.”<sup>494</sup> He explains: “In *The Moonstone* the mystery is finally solved, not altogether by human ingenuity, but largely by accident. Since Collins, the best heroes of English detective fiction have been, like Sergeant Cuff, fallible; they play their part, but never the sole part, in the unravelling.”<sup>495</sup>

In turn, Eliot’s identification of the nature of the genre via *The Moonstone* gives us a clue to the potential identity of the novel beyond genre; but genre, nevertheless, has the potential to erase *The Moonstone*’s as yet undetermined identity as a novel or, if not so much erase, then encrypt in the double sense that, as I’ve suggested (in Chapter One), is the function of genre. To

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<sup>492</sup>Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 144.

<sup>493</sup>Eliot, p. 413.

<sup>494</sup>Ibid.

<sup>495</sup>Ibid.



deem *The Moonstone* the first and the perfection of the genre severs its potential relationships with other novels of its times.

What we have then in the apparently single text of *The Moonstone* are two black cats; but instead of creating the experience of déjà vu, the understanding of *The Moonstone* as an original generic text superimposes the cats and erases the glitch. Against this, we have to assume that the matrix has been reset, something which attending to the Prologue lets us glimpse. Meanwhile, the space between the Prologue and the first book of the novel is that glitch. This is not simply a matter of the relationship between what is generic about *The Moonstone* and what is heterogeneous in relationship to the generic structure. Instead, the glitch that is still visible in *The Moonstone* is the key to the detective narrative's political, ideological, and historical essence.

#### 4.1 CRIME AS ORIGIN

In "Goethe's Elective Affinities," Benjamin offers a formulation of the historical life of a work that makes a useful distinction between something like what the text means and something like what it appears and has appeared to mean to different eras. In Benjamin's terms, this distinction is between "the truth content" of a work and its "material content." With due caution, one can say that the latter term can be substituted with the idea of the "meaning" of a work if we acknowledge the fact that this so-called "meaning" would, according to Benjamin's philosophy, not necessarily be locatable at any given historical moment. The "material content" of the work, by contrast, is that which is potentially superficial to the work in so far as "commentary," the mode of description of the literary work concerned with material content, is preoccupied with

“minuteness of detail”; but material content is also something like the material embodiment of the truth content and is therefore necessary at the time of the creation of the work. As the work endures over time, however, “the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work’s history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore.”<sup>496</sup>

This formulation is analogous to Benjamin’s discussion of the nature of “origin.” Like the original phenomenon, the work at its origin binds together the meaning that will one day be viewed by all of history in its totality<sup>497</sup> and the form in which that meaning is contained, encrypted, disguised, and preserved over time. At the same time, it is also the case that the meaning of the work can be misunderstood because of the way the material content appears to any given era. In order to critique a work, that is, to get at its truth content, the would-be critic must therefore absolutely deal with the material content, must first decode the material content. Benjamin seals this description with an image of critique as archeological work. Of the critic, he writes:

One can compare him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996), p. 297.

<sup>497</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-264.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

The critic's work, that is, must proceed by first understanding the way a work has been read; and Benjamin's image also nicely depicts the effects of certain readings to alter the work as a physical altering of the text; readings have literally been written over the text. I use this image because it encapsulates, among other conventions of the detective story, the place of crime in the origins of the detective narrative.

It is Todorov, once again, who makes most visible both the fundamental assumption that the *sine qua non* of the detective story is crime and how that assumption dictates our understanding of the form. He writes: "at the base of the whodunit we find a duality [...] This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation."<sup>499</sup> Todorov continues: "In their purest form, these two stories have no point in common."<sup>500</sup>

The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn [...] The hundred and fifty pages which separate the discovery of the crime from the revelation of the killer are devoted to a slow apprenticeship: we examine clue after clue, lead after lead. The whodunit thus tends toward a purely geometric architecture: Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, for example, offers twelve suspects; the book consists of twelve chapters, and again twelve interrogations, a prologue, and an epilogue (that is, the discovery of the crime and the discovery of the killer).<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Todorov, p. 44.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-45.

As a result, according to Todorov, the second story, the story on the page, as it were, “is a story which has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime.”<sup>502</sup> It is for this reason, Todorov explains, that “theoreticians of detective fiction have always agreed that style, in this type of literature, must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct.”<sup>503</sup>

While there are all kinds of demonstrable practical problems with this, it is the theoretical structure that is most problematic. In order for Todorov’s description to make sense, we are required to believe or perform a belief in the reality and tangibility of the fictional world beyond what we experience of it, beyond what is written of it. Otherwise, the story of the crime cannot be said to pre-exist the story of its investigation. It is true that the story of the investigation pretends to be a story of discovery of what has gone on before, but it is a pretense and an effect of the story of the investigation. The story of the investigation is also the story of the crime; and the story of the investigation splits those two stories as an effect of its plotting.

If the crime comes first and precedes the actual narrative of its investigation, then the narrative of its investigation is as necessary as a real investigation into a real crime. Accordingly, the narrative is governed by the absent reality of the crime. In this view, the detective narrative is a zero-sum game, where the subtraction of order that the crime represents is balanced by the addition that is the narrative itself, which, thereby, only exists ultimately to make itself and all its effects disappear. On the other hand, to note that the crime is part of the narrative of its investigation is to shift the relationships and be able to ask: what is the necessity of the crime in relationship to the narrative?

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

To ask this question of *The Moonstone* is to discover both a stronger link between it and other Collins novels and a different kind of necessity for the crime and the narrative. As already mentioned, the first volume of what is called “The Story,” which is preceded by the Prologue, begins with the announcement that the entire story’s function is to serve as a testament to what, at the initiation of the project, are the events of “two years since.”<sup>504</sup> The precise reason for creating such an official record, explains Blake, is that “‘in th[e] matter of the Diamond [...] the characters of innocent people have suffered under suspicion already,’”<sup>505</sup> specifically his own, Rachel’s, and Rosanna Spearman’s. Blake continues, “‘The memories of innocent people may suffer, hereafter, for want of a record of the facts to which those who come after us can appeal,’” thus concluding that “‘there can be no doubt that this strange family story of ours ought to be told’.”<sup>506</sup> However, unlike the case of *The Woman in White*, when we get to the ending of *this* “strange family story,” we discover that there seems to have been no real reason for it; there seems to be no area of outstanding suspicion nor any variance between the private family story and official record. We learn that it was Godfrey Ablewhite who, having observed Blake take the Diamond, took it from Blake, stole it from the house, and pawned it as security for debts amassed by what Sergeant Cuff calls the side of him “kept hidden from the general notice”—the side showing “a man of pleasure, with a villa in the suburbs which was not taken in his own name, and with a lady in the villa, who was not taken in his own name, either.”<sup>507</sup> We also learn that Ablewhite was murdered, most likely by the Hindu priests set to guard the Moonstone, when he took possession of it again. These and other things we learn in reports by Mr. Bruff, the Verinders’ lawyer, and Sergeant Cuff, the only two persons really in a position to either protect

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<sup>504</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 8.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

or harm the family reputation. Moreover, the suspicions regarding the Herncastle family and the Verinder household were always kept within the family. With the exception of Sergeant Cuff, it is a family drama kept within the family. And so, as concerns the stated purpose for recounting the story through various witnesses' testimonies, the entire narrative seems peculiarly excessive. In fact, it is only through the writing of the story, what Todorov would call the "second story," that we learn anything about the crime.

Read as a detective novel sprung fully formed from the head of the god of genre, despite assumptions about the primacy of the crime over its investigation, it does not really matter *when* the crime is in relationship to the narrative. We simply grant the novel the leeway it needs to establish both sides of its enterprise: the crime and the story of its investigation. Read as a detective novel, moreover, neither side of the enterprise is necessary beyond the requirements of the generic code. Read as a Collins novel—which is to say, read as a novel with a place in history, something which gets us to an understanding of the genre as a "socially symbolic" structure—the relationship between the invention of the crime and the story of the investigation is reversed; and it is the crime that now appears necessary.

One of the things that has the potential to obscure the necessity of the crime with which the main portion of the narrative is preoccupied is precisely the assumption that the Prologue is immaterial. Reading *The Moonstone* alongside of *The Dead Secret* and *The Woman in White*, on the other hand, brings the Prologue into more prominence. What is the Prologue but an official record about and from the past whose revelation threatens the security of the present and the health of the future? As such, it takes its place amongst all the various documents in Collins' novels that must be exposed and refuted. It is akin to the letter dictated by Mrs. Treverton and hidden by Sarah Leeson in *The Dead Secret*. It is, likewise, this novel's equivalent of both the

forged church register that falsely attests to the marriage of “Sir” Percival’s parents and the coroner’s certificate that falsely attests to the death of Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*.

However, the way it is like these documents is more visible when we look at the way all of these documents appear to be unlike each other: some are documents that record truths and some are documents that ratify lies. In *The Dead Secret*, the letter records the truth of Rosamond’s parentage and gives the lie to official records, while in *The Woman in White* the documents mentioned are official records that perpetuate lies. Throwing even more difficulty in the way of grouping these documents together is their effect or potential effect on the novels’ female protagonists. In *The Dead Secret*, the truth recorded in the document threatens the Rosamond’s position in her marriage and her right to the inheritance that will partially support that marriage. In *The Woman in White*, the two false yet official documents mentioned stand in the way of justice for Laura. Meanwhile, in *The Moonstone*, the Prologue is somewhat indifferent vis-à-vis the Rachel’s future happiness. In so far as it only records what we would call hearsay, the family paper of which the Prologue consists only suggests a potential taint to Rachel’s inheritance but doesn’t endanger Rachel’s place in the family. What does bring the similarity of these documents to light is the question of the opportunities they afford the bourgeois hero.

Like *The Dead Secret* and *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone* is the story of the bourgeois reterritorialization of aristocratic space and subjects. Though it is perhaps less obvious because Franklin Blake is Rachel Verinder’s cousin and therefore related to the aristocratic wing of the family, he is the bourgeois lover whose claim to the hand of the female protagonist is based on love and good character; as if to make this point clear, furthermore, Betteredge prepares us for the arrival of Franklin Blake by giving us an account of his history.... The aristocratic

Herncastle family, which consists of Rachel's mother, Mrs. Ablewhite (Rachel's aunt on the distaff side), Mrs. Blake (also Rachel's aunt on the distaff side), and the infamous John Herncastle, stand in the novel as the vestige of an older time. All of the Herncastle women have married bourgeois professionals except Rachel's mother, who is *Lady Verinder*. Rachel, then, by the end of the novel, if she weren't to marry Franklin Blake, would be the last of two aristocratic lines, the Herncastles and the Verinders. One difference between this and various other Collins novels is that, unlike the Vanstone estate in *No Name*, Porthgenna Tower in *The Dead Secret*, and Limmeridge House in *The Woman in White*, the fate of the Verinder estate never seems to be in jeopardy; moreover, unlike in the former novels, there seems to be no tangible impediment to the marriage between the aristocratic female protagonist and the bourgeois suitor.

It would seem almost perverse, then, that Collins throws in an impediment in the form of Blake's theft of the Diamond if the theft of the Diamond is only an impediment to the consolidation of aristocratic and bourgeois power. The theft of the Diamond is not an impediment, however; it is rather the means by which the true impediment, made nearly invisible in this novel, is overcome, namely, the problem of both Blake's and Rachel's origins.

Too often, the Moonstone is read as Rachel's property when it is stolen, an idea confirmed by the readings that see the Diamond as a symbol for Rachel's virginity. Summing up a lot of work in this vein, Tamar Heller writes, "readings of the mystery plot of *The Moonstone* tend to focus on the psychosexual symbolism of Franklin Blake's stealing Rachel's jewel from her boudoir at night."<sup>508</sup> It is a reading that the novel itself suggests in so far as Rosanna Spearman confesses in her letter that, upon finding that it is Franklin Blake's nightgown that has been smeared with the paint from Rachel's bedroom door, "the first suspicion that crossed [her]

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<sup>508</sup> Heller, p. 144.



mind” is one that she “shall not tell [...] in plain words,” but which plainly does neither Blake nor Rachel credit according to the mores of Victorian society.<sup>509</sup> Spearman explains that she did eventually think better of the suspicion, but for this reason:

“If you had been in Miss Rachel’s sitting room, at that time of night, with Miss Rachel’s knowledge (and if you had been foolish enough to forget to take care of the wet door) *she* would have reminded you—*she* would never have let you carry away such a witness against her, as the witness I was looking at now!”<sup>510</sup>

Spearman’s letter affirms, therefore, the connection between the Diamond and Rachel’s virginity by treating the paint stain as symbolic of another kind of entry.

The question is how we are to reconcile this reading with what we learn in the Prologue, which is that if the Diamond belongs to anyone, it belongs to the effigy of the goddess from whose forehead it was removed or to the Indian priests who are meant to guard it. This knowledge, far from refuting the reading of the relationship between the Diamond and what makes Rachel an inviolate deity, complicates it in interesting ways. For one, it highlights something implied by the tone and import of this portion of Spearman’s letter. In recognizing the steps that Rachel herself would take to hide this other kind of theft, Spearman reminds us of a less hidden, more metonymic than allegorical, relationship between the Diamond and Rachel’s ‘maidenhead’. Both are property, and while the former, as an inheritance, represents a kind of dowry, the latter is more valuable property to the Victorian woman in so far as it ensures she herself and her other property can become property in the marriage economy. Let’s not forget that the Diamond, though more monetarily valuable cut into smaller diamonds, is more sacred in its uncut state. Also, the suspicion that Rachel has faked the Diamond’s theft so as to have it cut

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<sup>509</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 314.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*

and sold to cover more or less unmentionable debts is one Sergeant Cuff expects to be proven upon hearing of the Diamond's circulation in London.

In turn, this association dispels some of the mystique of virginal status. Virginitude makes of the woman not mass-produced and -circulated goods but a true commodity, the thing whose value is always more than and ineffable in relationship to its price. Virginitude promises that the true value of the woman as purchased goods will only reveal itself to the mind's eye of her possessor. Virginitude supercedes the use value of the wife—it is the original box she came in. As a symbol for her virginitude, then, it isn't the theft of the Diamond that is the problem; rather, it is her inheritance of it. Because the Diamond is already stolen property, Rachel's inheritance of it suggests that her sublime wholeness has already been fractured like the Diamond itself, with its visible flaw, like (one cannot help but suspect the association) Henry James's "golden bowl." At a further remove, even, the Diamond is a symbol for Rachel's aristocratic origins and at once embodies the idea of aristocratic property as theft and the violence of imperialism. But in so far as it embodies aristocratic origins and lineage, the real problem that the Diamond stands for and, ultimately, stands in for is the insuperability of lineage as a logic for the transfer of power and property. As inherited property, the Diamond represents Rachel's place in a system that is bigger than Franklin Blake's household could ever be.

At one stroke, the Diamond's theft solves both problems of origin. On the one hand, it removes Rachel's ties to her aristocratic past, ties which are represented as unhealthy; on the other hand, it gives Blake an opportunity to start the family story over again. In this way, we can read the writing of the Story as a direct response to the family letter that makes up the Prologue. Against a letter that records conjecture and that damages the family reputation in part, Blake proposes a narrative that begins at the beginning and records every event through the agency of

its closest witness. This allows him to step in and position himself as the custodian of the family's reputation and as the ultimate authority on the family even before we learn, as we do at the end, that he is the new head of the family, Rachel's husband, and soon-to-be father to the heir of the Verinder estate. The narrative, therefore, is necessary to ratify Blake's position.

The crime is, in turn, necessary to license the narrative; and here we can return to Todorov's "typology." In Todorov's mapping of the duality of the detective story structure, he gives us two stories as two lines lying end to end, and "in their purest form," he adds, "these two stories have no point in common."<sup>511</sup> Carrying this through, we get the idea that the first story, the story of the crime, ends at the commission of the crime and the second story, the story of the investigation, picks up no matter what amount of time later at the discovery of the crime. However, when we challenge the idea of an actual first story pre-existing the second, then the storylines can no longer be seen to lie end to end but instead must be seen to be side by side. However, even this mental image is useful only as a conceptual intermediary. The fact is that there is one narrative line that moves from beginning to end. Nevertheless, Todorov's conception of the double structure has merit because it describes the effect or the experience of the detective story. We have the *sense* that as we read forward in time, we are actually going backward in time and that the narrative we are reading is only the vehicle for a reconstruction of past events.

The way this works has to do with the peculiar double place the crime occupies in the detective narrative. In the detective story, the crime represents an apparently concrete but absent origin for the narrative, while the narrative, moving inexorably away from that origin, appears to gradually discover the fullness of that absent time and event. The way it does so is to take

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<sup>511</sup> Todorov, p. 44.

fragments of a past that exist in the present, erstwhile called clues, and reconstruct their relationships; or at least, this is what appears to be the case.... It appears to be the case, however, only if we believe in a reality prior to the writing of the narrative. Ideas and terms like “discover,” “clue,” and “reconstruct” point to the near ineluctability of this belief, yet because the origin the narrative appears to return to *is* absent, there is no assurance that the truth is being discovered or that the process of re-arranging certain aspects of the present is a matter of *reconstruction* instead of just a matter of construction. Nevertheless, it is precisely the way the detective narrative creates and operates under the aegis of this belief that makes it such a useful mechanism for giving bourgeois reality a provenance. Any counterfeit reality can be constructed as if it were always there, original and authentic.

By projecting the crime into the space between the Prologue and the beginning of what is essentially Franklin Blake’s story, *The Moonstone* follows the pattern set by earlier Collins novels. It cuts across feudal and aristocratic forms of historical continuity and opens a space for the bourgeois hero to enter that history and narrate himself into it, and part and parcel of this pattern is the way the story revises and reconstructs the aristocratic female protagonist as the bourgeois, domestic angel.

Meanwhile, *The Moonstone*’s deviation from this pattern is illuminating of the success of a form that, in the Collins corpus, is really just one among many formal experiments. In previous novels, the struggle to turn feudal daughter into bourgeois wife, Cordelia into Lady MacBeth, required a strange doubling of these female characters. So, in *The Dead Secret* there needed to be two Rosamonds—the virtual Rosamond, who is the Treverton’s daughter, and the real Rosamond, who is not the Treverton’s daughter but who, nevertheless, is the only person who could have ever filled that now evacuated identity. In *The Woman in White*, there needed to

be two Laura Fairlies, Laura Fairlie herself and the counterfeit Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick (who is really her half sister), so that the latter could eventually rescue the former from her imprisonment as feudal daughter and tortured gothic wife—rescued, it should be added, not just for her sake but so that she could eventually become Walter Hartwright’s wife and make him father to the heir of Limmeridge House. However, in *The Moonstone*, the Diamond itself functions as an alternative to a doubling of the heroine. On the one hand, it holds Rachel’s place in her family line; on the other, it is a thing, not an inalienable aspect of her person, and in it is objectified the “bad blood” of her family.

The Diamond, therefore, takes its place amongst several things in the novel that, together, reiterate and reconstruct the problem of laundering the aristocratic heiress so that she can be circulated in the bourgeois marriage economy. This is to say that the Diamond only exists so that it can be stolen. At one and the same time that Collins hits upon the idea, as it were, of fashioning an object that expresses and contains the historical intransigence other Collins novels explore, he also discovers the detective narrative proper as a way to regulate the less tractable kinds of doubling his other novels enact. Doubling has fully moved to the level of the narrative structure and become invisible as re-writing. So, while *The Moonstone* has its beginnings, with other Collins novels, in the problem of origins, crime has come to stand in for those absent origins as a specific absence. It is this substitution that gives us the genre as we know it.

## 4.2 DETECTING INNOCENCE

Because crime not only appears to be but has supplanted the detective narrative’s origins in historical intransigence, the point of detection likewise appears to be and has become the return

to an interrupted status quo chiefly by discovering and removing the perpetrator of the crime. Detection, that is, has become largely a matter of subtracting, getting to the bottom of, dispelling, uncovering, and so on. Questioning the applicability of this model of the detective story to *The Moonstone*, Tamar Heller argues that the novel ought to be thought of as “Collins’ great cover-up,”<sup>512</sup> a text that appears to reveal but also conceals. To develop this account, she cites the peculiarity of “Ezra Jennings’ version of detection” as an act of writing and its ambiguous status in relationship to truth.<sup>513</sup> Jennings appears in the latter part of the novel, in the portion entitled “The Discovery of the Truth,” and helps Franklin Blake reconstruct what happened on the night the Moonstone was stolen. By this time, Blake already knows from Rachel that it was he himself who took the Diamond from the drawer in her sitting room where she had put it after her birthday party, but what he doesn’t know is how he took it and where it has got to now. He cannot remember a thing about what happened that night after he went to bed. And it is this brief amnesia that sends him to visit Mr. Candy, the doctor who was at Rachel’s birthday party—and, we later find out, slipped Blake a dose of laudanum—to find out what he might know about the night. When he arrives, he finds that Candy’s own memory has been addled by the fever he contracted on the night in question and cannot quite remember what he had to tell Blake. However, Jennings, his assistant, has more information because he had recorded verbatim all the words that were uttered by the doctor in his delirium. Through a process of reconstruction, which he painstakingly describes to Blake as a way of assuring him that he has not interjected any ideas of his own but only pieced together Candy’s delirious ramblings according to a sound logic, Jennings has discovered that Candy slipped Blake the dose of laudanum. Planning to tell

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

Blake the next day, Candy had done so as a practical demonstration of the powers of medicine Blake had so roundly criticized the night of the party.

About Jennings' notes, Heller argues two things: that "Jennings' method for arriving at this conclusion vindicates not only Blake but the process of detection itself. Piecing together 'broken phrases' spoken in delirium by the doctor [...], Jennings demonstrates the power of reason and reading"<sup>514</sup>; but also that "Jennings' version of detection [...] is riddled with gaps and silences."<sup>515</sup> She continues, "since the only clues he has are broken words surrounded by empty spaces," a literal rendering of Jennings' notes, "the narrative he reconstructs [...] may not be the truth of what happened so much as a fictional account arrived at by guesswork."<sup>516</sup> She concludes, "such paradoxes show how in *The Moonstone* detection defers rather than fixes meaning, uncovering mysteries only to suggest that others stay covered up."<sup>517</sup>

For Heller, the unevenness of the revelations is evidence of a fundamental ideological division in the novel between the Victorians' self-constructed myth of domestic harmony and the recognition of the casualties of that apparent harmony (women's autonomy, working class rights, the Others constructed by the British empire, and so on)—casualties represented by various instances of the "buried writing" that Heller notes. She argues that the novel evidences in every apparent impulse to support Victorian domestic and public ideology an equal impulse to expose its contradictions and undermine its stability. Finally, she argues, the structure of the end of the novel also bears this out, failing or perhaps refusing to leave the security and sanctity of the domestic sphere fully intact; "the narrative," she points out, "ends twice, once in England, the

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.; Heller cites Ross Murfin as a critic who also considers the potential fictional quality of Jennings reconstruction.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

second time in India,”<sup>518</sup> noting the way that the Epilogue traces the Diamond’s disappearance from England and return to its native land. She writes that, while it can be said that “the English ending is the finale to the novel’s suppression of all that is outcast and Other,”<sup>519</sup> the last pages nevertheless “mov[e] from the warm contentment of English domesticity (with Rachel expecting a child, her new jewel) to the foreign, dark, and impersonal realm of the colonial Other.”<sup>520</sup> Therefore, Heller argues, “in choosing to conclude on the margins of resistance, Collins thus resists the falsely comfortable closure of the English narrative to end instead with the riddling ambiguity of a question mark: ‘So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell?’”<sup>521</sup>

In accord with Heller, I plan to examine detection in *The Moonstone* as more complicit in concealing than one might at first assume, but I want to argue that this gives us insight into the original nature of the detective narrative rather than proving an exception to it. Indeed, detection in *The Moonstone* is almost diametrically opposed to notions of the purpose of the detective narrative to reveal, unveil, or strip away. Instead of deeming it a cover-up, though, I would rather call it a counterfeit.

The notes Jennings takes by Candy’s bedside are a good topic for this examination of *The Moonstone* as a forgery. Jennings’ account of the process by which he reconstructed Candy’s thoughts from the words that he spoke at different times throughout his delirium is an almost exact rendition of what I have been arguing is the way the detective story works to fabricate (in the guise of discovering) a reality. For a lot of his career, Jennings has been writing a medical

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.



treatise ““on the intricate and delicate subject of the brain and the nervous system””<sup>522</sup> and was employed in that work as he sat tending Candy. As it happened, at the time of Candy’s delirium, Jennings had reached a section of his own book devoted to the subject, specifically a section that deals with the question of whether it is viable to conclude that “a loss of the faculty of speaking connectedly, implies of necessity the loss of the faculty of thinking connectedly.”<sup>523</sup> As an experiment, Jennings says, he decided to test the opposite possibility. To begin, he “[took] down the patient’s ‘wanderings’, exactly as they fell from his lips’.”<sup>524</sup> Next, ““at odds and ends of time’,” he ““reproduced [his] shorthand notes, in the ordinary form of writing—leaving large spaces between the broken phrases, and even the single words, as they had fallen disconnectedly from Mr Candy’s lips’.”<sup>525</sup> Carrying on, he tells Blake:

‘I then treated the result thus obtained on something like the principle which one adopts in putting together a child’s “puzzle.” It is all confusion to begin with; but it may be all brought into order and shape, if you can only find the right way. Acting on this plan, I filled in each blank space on the paper, with what the words or phrases on either side of it suggested to me as the speaker’s meaning; altering over and over again, until my additions followed naturally into the spoken words which came before them, and fitted naturally into the spoken words which came after them. The result was, that I not only occupied in this way many vacant and anxious hours, but that I arrived at something which was (as it seemed to me) a confirmation of the theory that I held. In plainer words, after putting the broken sentences together I found the superior faculty of thinking going on, more or less

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<sup>522</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 369.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.* p. 370.

connectedly, in my patient's mind, while the inferior faculty of expression was in a state of almost complete incapacity and confusion.<sup>526</sup>

Yes, but whose "superior faculty of thinking"? Whatever one thinks these days about reading tiny fragments of speech according to a system of interpretation that is so highly developed as to be nearly irrefutable and must almost necessarily overwhelm the life of the fragments, it is clear that Collins seems to think that this is a valid operation or that we are meant to give credence to the validity of the operation.

Nevertheless, this account requires some critical intervention. We might start from the question of whether or not we can call this detection. Certainly it appears to be a matter of working with clues, establishing their potential interrelationships, and hypothesizing about the absent reality they point to. "Detection," however, specifically refers to uncovering, discovering, unearthing, etc. That is, the original meaning of "detection" requires that a reality be exposed. It is true that Jennings believes there is a reality being exposed, but this is deeply tied to the theory he sets out to prove. Jennings poses the possibility that the true part of the mind, the part that thinks, intends, and has agency, remains coherent during delirium while the faculty of speech may falter. How he would square this with the fact that Mr. Candy, upon recovering from the fever and delirium, remains incapable of all but momentary coherence is not something the novel explores. To test whether his hypothesis is accurate, he tries to find a logic and a story that would prove Candy's broken phrases and single words to be not truly "wanderings" (note the use of the quotation marks when Jennings utters this word) but the product of the brief moments when the steadfast rational mind overcomes the limitations of the failing faculty of speech.

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

The analogy to the puzzle, by which Jennings probably means a jigsaw puzzle, either with a picture or a definite shape, is interesting, here. With a jigsaw puzzle, especially a child's version of it, there would be an image dictating what the pieces, when put together, would add up to. Accordingly, the presumption is that behind Candy's broken speech is an intact understanding that dictates the relationship of the pieces to each other and to the whole, a whole which only has to be discovered by Jennings. However, the whole exists in Jennings' mind in such a way that there is no way to know whether it matches what is in Candy's mind. On the one hand, he projects an intact image behind the apparent fragments; and on the other hand, he applies his own logic of what words and ideas "naturally" go with each other. The process of writing and rewriting that Jennings describes indicates, despite his pains to prove otherwise, the process by which the edges of Candy's broken phrases are smoothed to fit wherever Jennings thinks they should go. It is like, upon discovering that a particular piece of the jigsaw puzzle does not in fact properly interlock with the other pieces around the space in which you "know" it belongs, filing away or trimming the edges until it does fit, which is perfectly fine in terms of outcomes when there is no original picture. We should recall that Jennings only seeks to prove coherence and has no notion of what subjects he will discover in Candy's "wanderings," in which case, he cannot *not* find coherence.

This is not false detection against some other model of detection in detective fiction, however. It is not truly detection in comparison to an investigation of an actual crime, where the actual crime stands against the reconstruction and provides a test to its validity, (which is not to say that valid detection and reconstruction always are practiced in the world outside of the fiction). While it may appear to be less valid than other fictional detection, this is because in most detective stories the coherence or the idea of what really happened that the discovery of the

crime indicates is a construct that appears to lie outside of the detective's mind though it is in the author's. It is just that, in this case, Jennings is both author of the story (of Candy's absent thoughts) and its investigator. If the imperative were to get at the truth, this difference might be more significant, but the imperative is to reconstruct a whole from fragments.

The light this sheds on the larger detective project in *The Moonstone* has to do precisely with this imperative. In the second volume of the story, somewhat ironically named "The Discovery of the Truth," we soon learn from two sources why Rachel has kept aloof and set herself against the investigation into the theft of the Diamond and why she has refused all contact with Franklin Blake. First, there is the discovery of Rosanna Spearman's letter. Up until this point, the suspicion, originating with Sergeant Cuff, that Rosanna, a reformed thief, and Rachel have entered into a conspiracy to get the Diamond to London and have it cut and sold to cover some or other debts of Rachel's. Rosanna, it has been suspected, would be useful in this respect by virtue of having remaining contacts in the underworld. This has neither been quite confirmed or disproved at this point. There is some suspicion that the Diamond has been left with a pawnbroker (named Mr. Luker, of all things) because the three Indian priests have been seen in the vicinity of his shop; but no one quite knows how it got there if it is there. Rosanna has since committed suicide by drowning herself in the quicksand called the Shivering Sands from where a box containing her letter and the stained nightgown is recovered. Her letter explains why.

Rosanna "confesses" that the moment she first met Blake she fell in love with him. The letter goes on to tell the story of the events leading up to and after the theft of the Moonstone from her point of view, explaining along the way some of the actions she took that had previously appeared peculiar to the rest of the household. The significant portion of Rosanna's letter as concerns the mystery of the whereabouts of the Moonstone and who took it is her

account of finding the paint-smearred nightgown in Blake's bedroom. The first police officer on the scene, the Lestrade-like Seegrave, had alerted everyone to the clue of the blemish on Rachel's sitting-room door. Because he blamed it on the skirts or petticoats of one of the female servants who had crowded into the room, Rosanna checks her own skirts to see if she had just smeared the paint. Penelope, Rachel's maid and Betteredge's daughter, seeing Rosanna checking, tells her that she needn't bother because the paint would have been dry for some hours. Penelope explains that the paint's drying time was twelve hours and would have therefore been dry since 3 AM. She had also noticed the door when Rachel went to bed at midnight and knows that there was nothing wrong with it then. Later, as she was cleaning Blake's chamber, Rosanna finds the paint-smearred nightgown, and we have seen the results of her initial speculation about its significance. Finally, though, Rosanna comes to rest on the belief that Blake stole the Diamond, and she is not sorry to help cover it up. So, she sews another gown to replace it and hides the first in the box. Rosanna dies still believing in Blake's guilt.

Blake is astonished by the contents of the letter, knowing himself, as he believes, to be innocent of the theft. He and Betteredge, between them, try to account for the discrepancy. First, Blake suggests that Rosanna may have stolen the Diamond and smeared his nightgown with the paint to set him up for the crime. Betteredge stops this train of thought by telling Blake that he believes Blake "will be cleared of this [...] beyond all doubt," but that he "hope[s] [he] won't be cleared in *that way*."<sup>527</sup> Next Blake questions Betteredge regarding whether he was drunk the night of the party; Betteredge assures him he was not.<sup>528</sup> And finally, Blake asks

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<sup>527</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 309; emphasis original.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 329-330.

Betteredge, who has known him for a long time who knew him when he was a boy, whether or not Betteredge had ever witnessed him sleepwalking; the answer is again “no.”<sup>529</sup>

Blake returns to London and arranges with Mr. Bruff to surprise Rachel and force her to talk to him about the theft and to explain to him why she has rejected contact with him. Succeeding, he learns in his interview with Rachel that he did indeed take the Diamond and that she witnessed the entire scene. Blake had expected to learn something of Rosanna’s showing Rachel the nightgown out of jealousy to explain Rachel’s suspicion of him. In the midst of their argument, Blake finally breaks down, claiming he has been done “an infamous wrong.”

‘You suspect me of stealing your Diamond. I have a right to know, and I *will* know, the reason why!’

‘Suspect you!’ [Rachel] exclaimed [...] ‘*You villain, I saw you take the Diamond with my own eyes!*’<sup>530</sup>

With this revelation, Blake reflects, “from the moment when I knew that the evidence on which I stood condemned in Rachel’s mind, was the evidence of her own eyes, nothing—not even my own conviction of my own innocence—was clear to my mind.”<sup>531</sup> Nevertheless, hoping against hope to discover some explanation that would yet clear him of guilt, he asks Rachel to tell every detail of what she saw. “The one hope left for me,” he writes, “was the hope that she might have overlooked something in the chain of evidence—some mere trifle, perhaps, which might nevertheless, under careful investigation, be made the means of vindicating my innocence in the end.”<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

This is the true moment of crisis in the novel. From two sources, now, Blake has learned that he took the Diamond, and yet this cannot be the sum total of the truth. If he is to believe he took it, then how does he account for the fact that he cannot remember or the fact that the Diamond is not in his possession? This latter fact supplies an interesting counterpoint to the detection that does go on subsequently. Blake, Jennings, Betteredge, Mr. Bruff, and Rachel all learn, through the re-enactment of the crime, which I will discuss shortly, that the Diamond is no longer in the house. Once they realize this, a watch is set on Mr. Luker's shop for the person who has pawned the Diamond and who has promised to redeem it at the end of the month in which the final pages of the intrigue happen. They mean, of course, to find out who really took the Diamond by tracing it away from its current hiding place back to the whereabouts of the thief. What never seems to figure into anyone's deductive processes, however, is how the Diamond got from the house to London. (This is not to say that anyone would have been able to deduce that it was Ablewhite who removed the Diamond from the house, but it is significant that no one thought through the question.) A clue to the reason for this lies in Blake's above articulation of the promise of detective work. He articulates what is fairly comprehensive account of detective work, not just in the idea that an unnoticed "trifle" will prove the key to the whole mystery, but also in the idea that in reconstructing the events, literally or figuratively, an apparent fact can be transformed into a misperception. But in this case, the reason for this detective work is not to discover who is guilty but to prove that Blake is innocent.

With the idea of a typical detective story in mind, this distinction might not seem of much moment; proving another suspect innocent would seem to be the flipside of discovering the true guilty party. However, the re-enactment of the crime in *The Moonstone* suggests something belated about the reciprocation of these two outcomes. By the time Blake and Jennings discover

that Candy gave Blake the laudanum and that he probably took the Diamond under the influence of the drug, there would seem to be only one reason to re-enact the events: to discover where the Diamond is. The re-enactment is not even really necessary as a means to prove Blake innocent. Because we have Jennings' reconstruction of Candy's memory (which is not treated as dubious in the novel), we know that Blake was given the laudanum and was therefore not responsible for his actions (again, another thing we are not meant to doubt).

Nevertheless, the reconstruction is carried out. The plan which they execute centers around creating the external and internal conditions that led Blake to originally take the Diamond. To this end, they re-furnish the house as it was at the time, and Blake quits smoking. At the right moment, Blake is given the right dose of laudanum, is watched as it takes over, and is followed as he goes to Rachel's room and takes the crystal they are using to stand in for the Diamond. To this point, everything is working according to plan, but as Jennings, Bruff, Betteredge, and Rachel watch, Blake fails to leave the room again and is prematurely taken over by the "sedative influence" of the opium.<sup>533</sup> And so, because Blake falls asleep and never leaves the room, they never discover where he went next on the original night of the events and what he did with the Diamond. Far from finding this a disappointment and a failure, everyone is more or less satisfied with the outcome. This is a curious thing, however, since there seems to have been no reason at all for the experiment beyond discovering where the Moonstone's hiding place might be or might have been. Even before the experiment is tried, moreover, Rachel has already decided on Blake's innocence. In a letter to Jennings where she gives her permission for the use of the house and its re-furnishing, Jennings recounts, Rachel assures him "that [his] letter has

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid., p. 423.



satisfied her of Mr Blake's innocence, without the slightest need (so far as she is concerned) of putting [his] assertion to the proof."<sup>534</sup>

The key to the success of the experiment seems to lie in the presence of the witnesses and the specific character of these witnesses. The two primary, necessary witnesses are Betteredge, the steward, and Bruff, the family lawyer; both are functionaries of the former societal structure, a point which it is impossible to forget because they regularly remind us themselves that they are guards of tradition who see this experiment as ridiculous, at best, and more probably nefarious. Charged by Rachel to aid Jennings in his reconstruction of the house as it was at the time the Moonstone goes missing, Betteredge does as much as his duty will allow to obstruct the process. Betteredge registers his protest in the following diatribe:

'I have lived [...] nigh on fifty years in the service of my late lady. I was page-boy before that, in the service of the old lord, her father. I am now somewhere between seventy and eighty years of age [...] I am reckoned to have got as pretty a knowledge and experience of the world as most men. And what does it all end in? It ends, Mr Ezra Jennings, in a conjuring trick being performed on Mr Franklin Blake, by a doctor's assistant with a bottle of laudanum—and by the living jingo, I'm appointed, in my old age, to be conjurer's boy!'<sup>535</sup>

His protest does not end there, though. When asked to furnish certain areas of the house "exactly as they were furnished at this time last year," Betteredge tells him it is impossible because "there was a stuffed buzzard" which has "burst," a statue of cupid whose wing has been broken off, and a carpet that cannot be laid "because the man who laid that carpet down is

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

dead’.”<sup>536</sup> Bruff, the lawyer, demonstrates a similar reticence though also bound by duty to attend. From what Bruff can tell, the proposed course of action is “mischievous—for it excited hopes that might never be realised.”<sup>537</sup> It is, moreover, “quite unintelligible to *his* mind, except that it looked like a piece of trickery, akin to the trickery of mesmerism, clairvoyance, and the like.”<sup>538</sup>

At the time of the actual experiment, however, while both begin by staunchly occupying their positions on the subject, both also end getting caught up in the experiment. The change is meaningful. Rachel having noticed the suspicion and rudeness with which Betteredge and Bruff treat Jennings, she asks him why ““they seem to be in a conspiracy to persecute [him]’.”<sup>539</sup> Jennings replies: ““It is only the protest of the world, Miss Verinder—on a very small scale—against anything new’.”<sup>540</sup> It is an agon that Collins continues to develop through the ensuing scenes. A little later in the evening of the re-enactment, Jennings asks Betteredge to “remove the medicine chest into Miss Verinder’s sitting-room,” to which Betteredge responds: ““might I presume to ask [...] what my young lady and the medicine-chest have got to do with each other?’”<sup>541</sup> It is a reaction Jennings understands to mean that Betteredge “suspected [him] of some occult medical design on” Rachel.<sup>542</sup> Meanwhile, in his own way refusing to sanction the scandal of the affair, Bruff remains aloof, “with nine-tenths of his attention riveted on his papers, and with one-tenth unwillingly accorded to [Jennings].”<sup>543</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid., pp. 399-400.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p. 413.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

When their attention is finally devoted to the matter at hand and they have forgotten their censure, therefore, it is to be seen as the victory of the new against the traditions of the old guard. Noticing Bruff begin to attend to the experiment, Jennings writes: “Mr Bruff resumed his papers, with every appearance of being as deeply interested in them as ever. But looking towards him now, I saw certain signs and tokens which told me that the Law was beginning to lose its hold on him at last.”<sup>544</sup> And when Blake starts to show the first signs of the opium-induced agitation that suggests that Jennings’ plan is working, Jennings records that, “looking towards” Betteredge and Bruff, he “saw the Law (as represented by Mr Bruff’s papers) lying unheeded on the floor.” In fact, “Mr Bruff himself was looking through a crevice in the imperfectly drawn curtains of [Blake’s] bed. And Betteredge, oblivious of all respect for social distinctions, was peeping over Mr Bruff’s shoulder.”<sup>545</sup> After the experiment is over, both Bruff and Betteredge officially witness in writing a description of the events and confirm them as proof of Blake’s innocence. And it is their witness that is the key to the success of the detective story in *The Moonstone*.

The opening of the Story of *The Moonstone* has Franklin Blake arriving from the continent with dubious character according to Betteredge’s standards, bringing with him the poison legacy of the Diamond. How he ends up being charged with it is now worth considering in detail. His father, the failed Duke, was the only member of the extended family who would have dealings with Herncastle despite the contents of the family letter. His self-interested reasons for dealing with Herncastle had to do with his suit against the current Duke—Herncastle had papers that pertained to the case. In return for those papers, Franklin’s father promised to act as executor for Herncastle’s estate. Franklin’s father having died prior to the birthday when Rachel is to receive the Diamond, the duty devolves onto himself. Like other Collins novels,

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., p. 419.

then, the situation that leads to all the trouble has to do with the failure of the feudal and post-feudal system, especially as concerns the legal transfer of property. All the patriarchs are dead, but they still haunt the present in the form of various kinds of property that either are tied or become ties to some future dictated by the past.

For Collins, as for Dickens, the problem is how to start over again, break with the now illogical systems of the past, but without seeming to or without shattering a utopian vision of Englishness. The solution is to cut across that continuity while making it appear to be a restoration. This is the function of the detective narrative in *The Moonstone*. The crime of the theft interposes a new beginning between the Prologue and what is essentially Franklin Blake's self-authorship, but it is a new beginning that appears to be a past that appears to need to be discovered. Meanwhile, a new reality, a new whole, a new coherence, is being constructed. The re-enactment of the crime in *The Moonstone*, however, exposes this constructive rather than reconstructive principle through its sheer excessiveness. The point was never to discover the guilty party, which happens more or less offstage in the final pages of the novel. The point was never even to discover Blake's innocence. The point was rather to construct Blake's innocence in the eyes of the Law. It is interesting in this respect that Blake comes back to the Verinder estate in the beginning of the novel after spending most of his later boyhood and young adulthood on the continent and that this fact makes Betteredge wonder about his character. Recalling all he has learned about Blake from letters to himself and other family accounts, Betteredge sums up Blake in the following manner:

After he had learnt what the Germans could teach him, he gave the French a turn next, and the Italians a turn after that. They made him among them a sort of universal genius, as well as I could understand it. He wrote a little; he painted a

little; he sang and played and composed a little—borrowing, as I suspect, in all these cases, just as he had borrowed [money] from me. His mother's fortune (seven hundred a year) fell to him when he came of age, and ran through him, as it might be through a sieve. The more money he had, the more he wanted; there was a hole in Mr Franklin's pocket that nothing would sew up. Wherever he went, the lively, easy way of him made him welcome. He lived here, there, and everywhere; his address (as he used to put it himself) being 'Post Office, Europe—to be left till called for.' Twice over, he made up his mind to come back to England and see us; and twice over (saving your presence), some unmentionable woman stood in the way and stopped him.<sup>546</sup>

It is a past, albeit jovially dealt with, that must be secured in the past. The re-enactment of the crime symbolically solves this problem by literally reconstructing the household, minus an ornament or two, and starting over from the beginning with the difference that every single move that Blake makes is watched.

Minus an ornament or two is significant, however, and Betteredge is right that it is impossible to reconstruct the past completely. Nor does the novel desire this. The re-enactment's purpose is not to recreate the past in its entirety but to appear to recreate it and instead pass off its enactment as a re-enactment. In *The Moonstone*, the past and its counterfeit are not substantially different, but the one difference stands in for a lot of differences. The Diamond is absent; in its place is a history-less crystal dummy. This time when Blake takes it, he holds onto it and never leaves Rachel's sitting-room with it. It is a symbolic marriage that replaces and erases the earlier symbolic rape and which has no infernal provenance. In fact,

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

between the story of the theft and the story of the re-enactment, the continuity between present and past has been replaced with a counterfeit history.

In this respect, then, it is not even the case that this detective story “detects” innocence; it rather performs innocence. This illuminates the way in which this is not so much Collins’ “great cover-up” as his great counterfeit. The notion of a cover-up implies that an original reality or parts of that reality are still there and that the apparent revelations involved mask or hide that reality. A counterfeit, on the other hand, has an indifferent relationship to an original. If we take the example of a counterfeit banknote, we see this is the case. A counterfeiter certainly uses an original banknote—he wouldn’t be a very good counterfeiter, otherwise—but his aim is not to copy the original in order that the banknote replace the original. Instead, the aim is to create another banknote. If the aim were simply for a counterfeit to replace an original, we’d have to imagine that the counterfeiter is just counterfeiting for fun or out of some other motive and not to, literally and figuratively, make money. The purpose of the counterfeit, on the contrary, is to pass muster as any banknote not a specific banknote. In this sense, the aim of the detective narrative is to construct any history rather than reconstruct a specific past. As part and parcel of this, the detective narrative needs to construct subjects; it does so by passing all characters in review and “finding” most of them innocent.

### **4.3 “HOW MUCH ALIKE”?**

It might at first seem peculiar that the one person responsible for truly reconstructing the past, Ezra Jennings, is the person who utters the wish that Mr. Candy had “recovered in a complete

state of oblivion as to the past.”<sup>547</sup> Though Jennings is, in many of his actions, the quintessential antiquarian historian Nietzsche describes—paying attention to minute details and reconstructing images of the past meticulously though the lessons of the past have already been learned, he is also the man who understands what it means to be haunted by the past. His sentiments comprehend Nietzsche’s insight that “in the case of the smallest or of the greatest happiness [...] it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in a more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically* during its duration.”<sup>548</sup> Indeed, engaging in the re-enactment of the crime, Jennings obsessively reiterates how happy his involvement has made him. After receiving the letter in which Rachel acquits Blake, Jennings reflects:

Is it possible (I ask myself, in reading this delightful letter) that I, of all men in the world, am chosen to be the means of bringing these two young people together again? My own happiness has been trampled under foot; my own love has been torn from me. Shall I live to see a happiness of others, which is of my making—a love renewed, which is of my bringing back? Oh merciful Death, let me see it before your arms enfold me, before your voice whispers to me, ‘Rest at last!’<sup>549</sup>

That Jennings is an excessively marginal figure, however, may serve to explain these apparently opposed impulses.

Part of the reason that Heller deems the ending of the novel ambiguous, seeming to leave open the question of the security of the domestic harmony achieved at the end of the novel is the fact, we will recall, that the Epilogue follows the Diamond to India and ends on a question mark

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>548</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages for Life,” *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 62.

<sup>549</sup> *The Moonstone*, p. 394.

regarding its future adventures. Instead, I would argue that is rather the fact that this ending is provided in an Epilogue that secures Rachel's and Franklin's English home for the very reason that tracing the Diamond back to India proves first and foremost that the Diamond is not "here." The Diamond is one among several things in the novel that function as a way to bring the past to light so that it can be dispelled. The Diamond provides an opportunity for counterfeiting the past and constructing a new present. Candy and his memory likewise have this function. In both these cases, it is imperative that once they offer material for a "re"construction they disappear. Again, Candy's memory never returns; and the Epilogue assures us that the Diamond is back in India.

Jennings himself has a similar function in the novel. In the first place, he is constructed as so completely "Other" that people can barely look at him. When Blake first meets him, he deems him "the most remarkable-looking man that I had ever seen."<sup>550</sup>

His complexion was of a gipsy darkness; his fleshless cheeks had fallen into deep hollows, over which the bone projected like a penthouse. His nose presented the fine shape and modeling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among newer races of the West. His forehead rose high and straight from the brow. His marks and wrinkles were innumerable. From this strange face, eyes, stranger still, of the softest brown—eyes dreamy and mournful, and deeply sunk in their orbits—looked out at you, and (in my case, at least) took your attention captive at their will."<sup>551</sup>

To this visage is added "piebald hair," adding up to a figure who is treated with scorn by Betteredge and Bruff, who is treated by the gardener's wife "with an excessive civility which is

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<sup>550</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.



plainly the offspring of downright terror,” and who otherwise occasionally strikes people dumb with his unexpected appearance.<sup>552</sup>

However, Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder see him as their savior. Even though Blake gives us the above description, he is struck rather with his magnetism and charisma than by what other narrators of the novel deem his “ugliness.” After their first meeting, Blake reflects that “Mr Candy’s assistant had produced too strong an impression on me to be immediately dismissed from his thoughts.” The way he draws Blake’s attention is telling in the light of what Betteredge had said to Blake about the past immediately prior to this reflection. Thinking of the fact that Jennings now makes Candy’s rounds because of Candy’s poor health, Betteredge exclaims: “‘Times have changed! Times have changed! I remember when Mr Candy himself brought the list [of the poor to be given port and sherry] to my mistress. Now it is Mr Candy’s assistant who brings the list to me’.”<sup>553</sup> This is another instance of the way that Jennings represents the future; and it is as if Blake recognizes this in him and almost senses the way he will be instrumental in helping him. Rachel similarly sees in Jennings the promise of the future. By the time she meets him, she already knows that he does, but when she meets him, Jennings writes, “she looked at my ugly wrinkled face, with a bright gratitude so new to me in my experience of my fellow-creatures, that I was at a loss to how to answer her.”<sup>554</sup> What they see in him is the agency through which they will be brought together; and this agency is one he has because he can remember for them and then take what has gone on to his grave, which he mostly does, with the exception of the narrative of the re-enactment he leaves behind, by taking all his papers and journals with him. Moreover, in taking his treatise on the workings of the brain and

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., p. 410.

especially his discussion of the reconstruction of memory, it is as if he has taken with him the key to unlock the past.

It is not a matter of indifference that the two most significant Others in *The Moonstone* are Indian; but it would be too simple to read the novel as symbolically writing India and colonialism out of the picture. Though the travesty of the three “Hindoo priests” who practice clairvoyance and enact savage revenge is infamously racist, it is also the case that the novel ends by clearly condoning the return of the Moonstone to India and by not shedding a tear over Ablewhite’s death. Meanwhile, Ezra Jennings is the best, most sympathetic character in the novel. This seems to have something to do with the fact that Ezra Jennings is not just of South Asian descent; his “father was born an Englishman.”<sup>555</sup> What is interesting is the way that Jennings refers to his mother, though. In his explanation of his background, Jennings tells Blake that he “was born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was an Englishman; but my mother---.” And then he changes the subject. The other times Jennings practices a similar reticence is with respect to his own past; we know that he was in love but that the unearned and unnamed scandal that attached to him in his youth caused him to relinquish the woman he loved so that she wouldn’t be tainted by association. The coincidence suggests a certain correlation between India and a past that he wishes to forget. This resonates with the fact that the novel begins with a tale in which colonialism, violence, and diabolical greed are yoked together.

Alongside of this, Rachel’s attributes are compelling. She is described as “dark”: “her hair,” writes Betteredge, “was the blackest I ever saw. Her eyes matched her hair.”<sup>556</sup> Later, she

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

is described by Blake as “dusky.”<sup>557</sup> And, Betteredge adds that “she carried her head as upright as a dart, in a dashing, spirited, thoroughbred way.”<sup>558</sup> Taken together with her the fact that “she had ideas of her own” and “judged for herself” in all things,<sup>559</sup> she is a very different paragon of feminine beauty than Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*. Laura has “hair is of [a] faint and pale brown”—“not flaxen and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy.”<sup>560</sup> Her eyes “are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by poets, so seldom seen in real life.”<sup>561</sup> Walter Hartwright draws her as “a fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress” on the day he first met her.<sup>562</sup> Furthermore, while Laura’s name emphasizes her whiteness, it is not difficult to read in Rachel’s surname—Verinder—the identification of the ‘true Indian’.

This sheds light on a more specific reading of the novel’s resolution. Instead of banishing India and Otherness to elsewhere, the marriage between Franklin Blake (whose own name may or may not, itself, suggest the marriage between Germany and England relevant at the time) and Rachel Verinder becomes an idealized commingling between England and its principal colony that resolves the exploitation and violence with which the novel opens. Though understanding the novel in terms of the way India figures into the historical consciousness of the novel would take a more comprehensive study than I can furnish here, these details suggest that the novel’s counterfeiting of origins also depends upon putting both India as History and India as the present’s guilt in the right relationship to the new England that symbolically begins with Rachel and Franklin’s marriage.

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> *The Woman in White*, p. 46.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

As the detective, Jennings' meticulous reconstruction of the past and his recognition of the value of forgetting sheds light on the origins of the detective narrative. Instead of getting back to an original order or stripping away all pretense, the detective narrative "produces a state of complete oblivion as to the past" through its apparent reconstruction. By the time the detective narrative structure settles into the form we recognize, it is difficult to glimpse the moments of resetting. This is because the glitch is not visible as a repetition within any given story; instead the glitch has become represented by the concrete absence of the crime that poses as its origins and that licenses any construction. Therefore, with its becoming a genre, the detective narrative has reset the Matrix of historical consciousness and continues to travel through history as a mechanism for erasure.

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