Connotations
Vol. 18.1-3 (2008/2009)

Secrets Not Revealed: Possible Stories in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*[*1]

PHILIPP ERCHINGER

I. Preamble: The Law of Reading Fiction

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, first published between 1859 and 1860, features no less than ten different narrators whose eyewitness accounts, diary entries, letters and personal statements make up the separate parts of what the drawing master and editor Walter Hartright, himself one of the chief narrators, claims to have afterwards arranged in terms of a conclusive whole or, as he puts it in his brief "introductory lines," "one complete series of events" (Collins 1).[2] According to Hartright, the completeness and integrity of this "series of events" has been achieved by a faithful application of what he initially refers to as "the machinery of the Law." He uses this "machinery" as a model for his own narrative organisation, suggesting that "the story here presented" is told just as it might have been told in a Court of Justice, that is, "by more than one witness," but also "with the same object," namely "to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" (1). Thus, right from the start, this "Law" is introduced as an operative framework for the whole novel, a powerful means of selection and justification that has been used to implement both the regularity of the narrative design and its reliability. It is introduced as a theoretical model, in other words, that has been devised to structure the practical writing and reading of the narrative text, ensuring the credibility of its statements and the economy of its effects. At the same time, however, judging by the "intro-

[*]For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/deberchinger01813.htm>.

ductory lines," the "Law" also seems a rather doubtful and corrupted instrument to be deployed for that purpose, as it cannot really "be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion" and may even, "in certain inevitable cases," be "the pre-engaged servant of the long purse" (1). Indeed, Hartright's "story" itself exemplifies a yet undiscovered "case of suspicion," as he emphasises, that has escaped the grip of the law and is still "left to be told, for the first time, in this place" (1). Whatever its merits, then, as a basic model for the organisation of the prospective narrative, the law certainly seems to be a rather unconvincing choice. On the one hand, it is represented in terms of an authoritative system of clarification and distinction, an institutional mechanism of transformation and consolidation that is supposed to convert contingent events into calculable cases, indeterminate facts into meaningful evidence, inconsequent details into well-grounded proof, suspects into convicts, intuition into justified true belief and signifying discourse into significant plot. On the other hand, however, the law is expressly declared to work in a highly unpredictable and erratic fashion, potentially serving dubious purposes and thus creating an uneasy feeling of hidden secrets and unresolved cases that its "machinery" is unable to "fathom" or clear up.

The following essay will explore the irresolvable tension between these two aspects of the law and the way this tension grows as the novel unfolds. Eventually, I wish to argue that the ambivalent attitude towards the law, as expressed in Walter's "introductory lines," reveals a general problem that is developed and negotiated throughout Collins's text. This problem may be described as the creative struggle between a single pre-conceived theoretical law—which I take as a synonym for any binding principle or plan—and the many ways in which this pre-established law may subsequently be executed, reformed and transformed in the course of time. Putting it in these terms allows for a theoretical comparison between the conduct of a legal investigation and a reader's construction of a narrative plot because just as every law necessarily needs to be enacted and interpreted by a judge in order for it to have any effect in the first place, so

every story or plot necessarily needs to be assembled and interpreted by a reader for it to make sense.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, this analogy between the application of a law and the reading of a story is, again, explicitly suggested by the "introductory lines" of Collins's novel, prefacing the narrative to come: "As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now" (1). But whereas a legal enquiry is typically and, indeed, specifically carried out in order to reduce all the information to a single, unequivocal interpretation, always ruling out what is arbitrary and irrelevant for the benefit of what constitutes a sensible whole, a fictional text does not necessarily have to be read in the same way. For whereas a legal investigation is conducted for the sole purpose of discovering a coherent plot yielding a clear-cut decision on whether a given case conforms to a prefigured law or whether it does not, it is not at all clear for what particular purpose a fictional text exists and why it is read. It may be consumed for the sole purpose of discovering a coherent plot, and in many cases it probably is. But there is no need to assume that this is the only way the process of reading may be brought to a meaningful end. When reading fiction, in short, we cannot rely on some predetermined, positive law or rule to guide our interpretation.[3] Rather, I would like to suggest, the law of a fictional discourse always includes a negative element. Its real motives, grounds and purposes remain hidden and ill-defined. The law of fiction may even be deceptive.

Criticism has predominantly and often dismissively tended to regard Collins's novels as the aesthetically inferior products of a "mere carpenter of plot" (Pykett 220), who rigorously subjects his whole process of writing to a single preinstalled plan. Following the above premises, however, I shall deliberately avoid to read *The Woman in White* as the mechanical re-presentation of some primary law that exerts its page-turning command upon the text's discursive proceedings, compelling readers to judge the plenitude of the novel's potential meanings solely by some paraphrase of what seems to be 'Collins's' plot. Instead, willingly suspending my disbelief, I wish to

analyse the text of *The Woman* as a highly intriguing fabric of individual fictional discourses, managed, manipulated and lined up by an equally fictional editor, Walter Hartright, whose true motives and principles must, by virtue of their fictional character, necessarily remain secret and therefore, despite all his declarations to the contrary, fundamentally unreliable.[4] As I hope to demonstrate, this fundamental unreliability results in a novel that repeatedly exposes, questions and reverts the tacit laws and premises upon which it seems to proceed, thus exhibiting their contingency by juxtaposing them with the alternative options, 'roads not taken,' the secret possibilities and 'noisy,' 'sensational' intrusions that are likely, at any time, to distract readers from what they may feel compelled to take for 'Collins's' plot. Rather than simply accepting that *The Woman in White* is premised upon a single authoritative law prescribing the logic of its story, then, I want to look at the ways in which the text itself realises and interprets the rules and laws upon which it proceeds, questioning their validity by relating them to the secret possibilities that tend to be strategically excluded by any sole "reading for the plot" (Brooks 1984).

II. Lake Views

As we shall see, the unreliable double role of Walter Hartright as both narrating witness, himself subject to the law, and as controlling editor, subjecting the accounts of others to the law, plays a key role in the accumulation of these secret possibilities (cf. Bourne-Taylor 110). But there is one other episode that especially threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the whole rationale of lawful succession that purportedly governs the novel's evolutionary course. This episode is part of Marian Halcombe's diary account and assumes the form of a rather strange conversation, taking place at the beginning of the text's Second Epoch when most of the major characters, excluding Hartright, are assembled by the side of a little lake on the country estate of

Blackwater Park. "The morning," on this occasion, as we are told, "was windy and cloudy; and the rapid alternations of shadow and sunlight over the waste of the lake, made the view look doubly wild and weird and gloomy" (208). We may debate whether it is the otherwordliness of the scenery or his villainous personality that makes Sir Percival utter the remark that immediately follows this description, but his utterance should certainly be quoted in context and at length:

> "Some people call that picturesque," said Sir Percival, pointing over the wide prospect with his half-finished walking-stick. "I call it a blot on a gentleman's property. In my great-grandfather's time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now! It is not four feet deep anywhere, and it is all puddles and pools. I wish I could afford to drain it and plant it all over. My bailiff (a superstitious idiot) says he is quite sure the lake has a curse on it, like the Dead Sea. What do you think, Fosco? It looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?" (208)

Even given that, at this point of the text, we are already in a good position to anticipate that Sir Percival will sooner or later turn out to be a most insidious rogue, this remains a fairly puzzling statement because it is almost impossible to tell what should have motivated his claim that the lake "looks just the place for a murder." We could, of course, ascribe Percival's question to some recently formed murderous intention on his part, which he decides to discuss with Fosco at this point. But it remains unclear why of all places it should be "just" this poor remnant of a lake, "all puddles and pools," that strikes him as a suitable scene for a murder, especially because, with its "wide prospect," it seems to be fully exposed. Closer to Percival's meaning perhaps, we could also read his question as a rhetorical one, mock-seriously enlarging on the superstitiousness of his bailiff in order to frighten the ladies or enhance the "wild and weird" gloominess of the possibly bewitched scenery. But this would equally leave us in some doubt as to how exactly the place and its atmosphere relate to Percival's hidden plans or the plot as a whole. Either way there seems to be something offhanded and undecided about the whole statement,

making it appear just as "half-finished" as the walking stick that Percival uses to mark out his subject. In fact, the lake is hardly a subject worth mentioning; it is not even a proper lake, but at best "a blot on a gentleman's property," destined sooner or later to be drained, planted over and forgotten ("I wish I could afford to drain it and plant it all over"). Certainly, it seems to be nothing sensational or important, and if the statement were left as it is, a reading for the plot could and, I suppose, readily would let Percival's casual remark on the eerie look of the landscape pass for a harmless metaphor that is just as shallow as the lake itself ("not four foot deep anywhere"), at best underlining the uncanny, Gothic atmosphere of isolation that the text evokes in this scene. Significantly, however, there is an evident sense in which Percival's remark itself draws attention to the vague and indistinct meaning of its subject by contrasting its very insignificance with the magnitude and depth that it might once have had: "In my great-grandfather's time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now!" This is not without a tinge of irony because the longer we look at the lake, the more trifling and inconsequential it is bound to become, making it even harder to see in what way it is meant to be associated with a murder. More significantly still, we do not even have to analyse the subject of the lake as closely as we might because the text itself, in the person of Count Fosco, loudly and brashly answers to its unresolved function by embarking upon a literal reading of Percival's questionable assertion that immediately silences any speculation on a rhetorical or metaphorical sense that it might have been intended to transmit.

> "My good Percival!" remonstrated the Count. "What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body; and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer's footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on." (208)

Taking advantage of the obscure reasoning or motivation behind the utterance in question, Fosco integrates its meaning into a law of his own devising, "your solid English sense," that was manifestly absent from what Percival has said. In this way, Fosco opens up a 'road' of

possible interpretations that was never explicitly taken by the actual utterance from which it branches off now. He assumes a law of reading that was not intentionally established in order to have Percival's text yield a message not deliberately conveyed. He interprets an ambiguous remark as if it accorded to a "solid" law of unequivocal signification, patronisingly ("My good Percival") brushing off the possibility that something does not mean what its literal "English sense" most obviously seems to express.

This is a daring move, though, because it bluntly rejects the invitation to set up a form of communicative bonding—communally extended by Percival's tagged question ("it looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?")—in favour of open disagreement, likely to provoke an equally antagonistic response. To Sir Percival, accordingly, Fosco's "solid English sense" does not make much sense. More precisely, it is sheer "'Humbug!' as he decides to call it, "cutting away fiercely at his stick. 'You know what I mean. The dreary scenery—the lonely situation. If you choose to understand me you can—if you don't choose I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning'" (234). Remarkably, this still does not in the least clarify the issue. For, instead of simply disclosing the original "meaning" of his remark about the lake, Percival gestures incoherently at some kind of self-evident commonsense or no-nonsense (no "Humbug") logic ("The dreary scenery—the lonely situation") that, by virtue of being self-evident, needs no explaining. Implicitly, therefore, his vague gesture is firmly tied up with the conclusion that in obvious cases of commonsense anyone can be relied on to "choose" the right meaning anyway. But this is an utterly self-defeating conclusion because by refusing to spell out the supposedly stable law of understanding he refers to ("if you don't choose, I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning"), Percival once again leaves it to Fosco to state the supposedly obvious in his own terms:

> "And why not," asked the Count, "when your meaning can be explained by anyone in two words? If a fool was going to commit a murder, your lake is the first place he would choose for it. If a wise man was going to commit a

> murder, your lake is the last place he would choose for it. Is that your meaning? If it is, there is your explanation for you, ready made. Take it, Percival, with your good Fosco's blessing." (209)

Although Percival's original meaning has still not been disclosed at this point of the conversation, it appears fairly certain by now that the kind of commonsense that, according to Fosco, "can be explained by anyone in two words," is unlikely to match the kind of self-explanatory non-humbug that, according to Percival, anyone can immediately understand, if only he chooses to do so. If the initial meaning of Percival's claim that the lake is "just the place for a murder" indeed corresponded with Fosco's explanation, he must have had a foolish murderer in mind. But this, surely, is hard to imagine, especially if we suppose that he might himself have seriously considered committing a murder on the disputable spot.

Quite irrespective of such pseudo-psychological speculation on what might have been the 'real' considerations of a fictional character, however, there is a much more important point to this whole argument. Effectively, what the text's 'characters' are arguing about here is the question of what could explain the meaning of the lake, as it has been referred to by Percival's claim, but, notably, this question is never resolved. Percival and Fosco may agree that there is some sort of primary logic that could explain the function of the lake within a murderer's plot, but they seem to disagree markedly on the ways in which this logic needs to be applied in order to settle the meaning of the lake. What the characters are arguing about here, in short, is the right law of interpreting the lake's role within the fictional world of Collins's text. The novel stages a self-reflexive debate about possible ways of reading one of its own storytelling devices while the text's current subject, the lake scene, is suspended indeterminately between its evident shallowness and the hidden profundities of what it might turn out to mean. The Count's intervention has certainly played the leading part in triggering off this debate; for instead of simply complying with a presupposed way of reading, affirmatively overlooking any potential inconsistencies for the sake of upholding the pre-

suggested ("isn't it?") plot of communicative consensus, Fosco takes on the risk of polemical discord for the sake of recreating the lake's function in his own terms.

This exemplifies precisely the kind of performative reading that I am trying to advocate here because, by way of expounding Percival's meaning, the Count actually invents it afresh. Instead of subordinating his interpretation to the constraints of a prefigured road or plot, he vigorously pushes the discussion into a yet unexplored direction, questioning the purpose of the lake in order to transform its seemingly petty appearance into a topic of considerable depth. Indeed, in what follows, the cracked surface of the lake's meaning increasingly gives way to other debatable issues and stories, rising up from the still unsettled grounds of its insertion into the text. Laura, for one, now entering the discussion, does not at all seem to be much interested in the question of whether the lake is a suitable location for a crime or not, as we can gather from her own contribution to the debate:

> "I am sorry to hear the lake view connected with anything so horrible as the idea of murder," she said. "And if Count Fosco must divide murderers into classes, I think he has been very unfortunate in his choice of expressions. To describe them as fools only, seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim. And to describe them as wise men sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men and have a horror of crime." (209)

There are two aspects of this passage that deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, Laura's confession that she is "sorry to hear the lake-view" associated with the idea of murder emphasises once more that it is not the lake as such that is at issue here, but the way it is viewed. Certainly, viewing the lake as a mere prop within a criminal plot is only one way of describing it. Another way of reading the lake is to explore the possible incongruities and secrets that potentially lurk hidden beneath what may look like a rather flat and paltry matter at first. Fosco's interference, as I have argued, is a good example of this kind of hermeneutic activity because by way of interrogating Percival's initial, seemingly self-evident suggestion of meaning, he introduces a divi-

sion into the whole subject that threatens to tear its pragmatic identity of meaning apart, allowing a variety of different readings to come into play. Thus, instead of caring any further about the appearance of the lake itself—this is the second point to be noted—Laura seems to be much more discomforted and intrigued by the strangely unfamiliar murder figures that have emerged from the Count's creative explanation of Percival's "lake-view." The distinction between "foolish murderers" and "wise murderers" questions what she has "always heard" to be true because Fosco's "choice of words" does not agree with what she has taken for the regular way of characterising the criminal type. It confuses her habits of speaking and thinking, and transfigures and upsets the sort of commonplace view that is nicely epitomised in the oft-quoted proverb "that truly wise men are truly good men and have a horror of crime." In Fosco's view such "admirable sentiments" represent no more than a set of helpful illusions and reductionist stereotypes, handily arrayed "at the tops of copy-books" (209), but ultimately wanting substantial grounds. "A truly wise Mouse is a truly good Mouse" is an equally arbitrary and thus essentially hollow construct to his mind (209), devoid of any real world reference that could prove it to be true. Therefore, when Laura asks the Count to give her "an instance of a wise man who has been a great criminal" (209), resolutely trying to fortify the proverb's claim by empirical evidence, his logic can nonchalantly turn hers upon its head:

> "Most true," he said. "The fool's crime is the crime that is found out; and the wise man's crime is the crime that is not found out. If I could give you an instance, it would not be the instance of a wise man. Dear Lady Glyde, your sound English common sense has been too much for me. It is checkmate for me this time, Miss Halcombe—ha?" (209)

Rhetorically, it is difficult to defeat Fosco because he argues from radically relativistic premises: The claim of truth depends on how it is read, and there is always more than one way of reading a common phrase, just as there is always more than one way of looking at a lake. Hence every sentence may be true because no sentence by itself is.

Arguing from this position, therefore, means arguing from a position that is not fixed. It involves a perspective that always holds other perspectives in view, switching between them at will. This is why Fosco can maintain Laura's "sound English common sense" to be true while simultaneously re-appropriating it in terms of a different interpretative rule. In one language game, he can profess himself to be "checkmated," while knowing that in another one he has triumphantly won. This makes his attitude enormously flexible and versatile, but impossible to pin down, closely resembling the behaviour of the "wise man" that he refers to himself. Indeed, according to Fosco, the wise criminal represents "a subject that, strictly speaking, is not a subject at all."[5] He may exist, but he cannot be identified, located in legal terms or "found out." The plot that defines his true identity remains hidden and mysterious. The wise murderer, therefore, is a murderer never caught. He only exists in a negative form. He may exist or he may not. Positively, we cannot know.

In sum, then, Fosco's world view, as it can be abstracted from this lakeside conversation, his way of reading evokes a world in which nothing necessarily means what it appears to mean. Every flat surface, in this view, has many potential implications emerging from the depths of what it does not seem to be at first glance: from its negative side. This world view inevitably challenges and undermines the whole moral groundwork that both Laura and her sister Marian, who immediately rushes to assist her, firmly believe in. In Laura's and Marian's world criminals are not wise because wise men do not commit crimes. In their world, moreover, crimes, being a foolish thing, inescapably "cause their own detection" (209)—as another "moral epigram" (210) has it that Laura and Marian professedly trust to be true—because sooner or later they must inevitably be discovered by those who are wise. The moral logic that this well-defined world rests upon is obviously circular, first positing the very terms that it subsequently proves to be true. But it is exactly this circularity that also provides this world with its reassuring appearance of stability and order, conveniently shutting out everything that does not fit in with

the harmony of its internal design. In contrast to the pleasant security of this secluded space of domestic order, the moral setup of Fosco's world is pervaded by a disturbing miasma of doubt and disorder, relentlessly re-including all the alternative options, all the negatives and roads not taken, that conventional wisdom invariably, if inadvertently, attempts to block out. In his world, therefore, the whole "claptrap," of proverbs and self-consoling sayings by means of which "[s]ociety" seeks to varnish and preclude any thoughts on the potential inefficiency of the "machinery it has set up for the detection of crime" is radically threatened to lose its safeguarding force (210). As a consequence, in Fosco's world none of these sayings can any longer be quoted without being immediately questioned. "Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it?" (210). These questions gesture at an unacknowledged dark side of current knowledge, admitting the possibility that the real as it is, is not quite as it is widely imagined to be. They expose the contingency of the public world order by confronting it with a version of what it might be. In short, they infuse the sphere of the legal and official with an inkling of the illegal and unofficial that any social system constitutively needs in order to render its own dealings distinct. Paying attention to this secret side requires a particular practice of viewing or reading the ways and means by which cultural distinctions are made, as Fosco emphatically makes clear:

> "Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are *not* reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are *not* found; and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered and wise criminals who escape." (210)

Even "the few cases" that are shaped into a mediated form sometimes tend to remain unfinished and ill-explained, retaining unaccountable elements and bewildering clues that resist to fit into a logical plot. What is more, these unresolved issues testify to a whole dimension of negative cases that are never reported at all. Heeding these requires to

"multiply" that which is reported with that which is "*not* reported". It requires to think of the negative cases in terms of possible, undetected ones that have never entered our public frames. And it requires to accept that this strategy of reading may well undermine the very basis of our established concepts. If all crimes, for example, that are not reported are taken to be possible crimes that could have been reported, or may still be reported, as Fosco tries to make everyone believe, then such common truths as the "moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection" (211) immediately fall apart because no one can any longer be certain what exactly is meant by the word crime. A crime, of course, can only cause its own detection if it is already decided what constitutes a crime and what does not; but if "crime" is demonstratively taken to encompass what it obviously, by the entrenched standards of public belief, does not encompass, then the whole concept becomes vague and its definition no longer distinguishes it from what it is not. It becomes semantically indifferent, ceasing to make a clear-cut difference. If a crime committed can no longer be clearly discriminated from a crime not committed, then crime is potentially ubiquitous because every act that appears to be harmless and trivial could still be a crime. "Yes," says Fosco, crime may cause its own detection, but only "the crime *you* know of. And what of the rest?" (211). Discerning or perceiving no crime does not always mean that there is none.

III. The Actuality of the Possible

This episode has two important effects on the form and interpretation of the whole novel. Firstly, it obviously creates suspicion and distrust. It suggests an undercurrent of criminal activities below the surface of the seemingly ordinary, a realm of the possible, or a possible realm that the reader is not, or not yet, aware of, although it may already be part of what we, together with the characters, take to constitute the actual fictional world. Secondly, and in conjunction with this, Fosco's

insistence on the possible existence of the seemingly negative, on the existence of crimes not noticed, also casts some grave suspicion on the efficiency, authority and detective power of the very institution that has been claimed as a model for the narrative's form, that is, on the law. For while the law may serve as a viable medium to identify what is a crime and what is not, its very viability depends upon the presupposition that every act can ultimately be reduced to either one of these. Indeed, a legal investigation has to operate by gradually restricting possibilities, and by unswervingly interpreting all empirical evidence in terms of cause and effect. Its sole purpose is to produce a conclusive story, and yet—here is the crucial point of Fosco's argument—this involves a process of discarding some information as irrelevant that allows intelligent crimes to go unnoticed.

Fosco's argument has obvious sociological implications; it is, moreover, indicative of an issue in literary criticism that has been most inspiringly spelled out by Frank Kermode, who conceives of narrative in terms of an evolving dialogue between "two intertwined processes," namely the actual telling of a story and the possible ways of interpreting it. "The first process tends towards clarity and propriety ('refined common sense'), the second towards secrecy, towards distortions which cover secrets" (Kermode 164).[6] This dialogue between what is expressly said and what may be implicitly meant by an utterance is precisely what the lakeside episode fictively re-enacts as a dialogue between the characters of the narrative, suggesting that the hermeneutic activity of interpreting is itself an integral part of the story it is meant to interpret. This encapsulates a pivotal characteristic of *The Woman in White* as a whole. Right from the start, the way of reading the narrated story seems to be beset on all sides by endless possibilities of interpretation whose scope and meaning most of the characters and narrators are just as apprehensive and excited about as most of the readers who are remorselessly pushed forward by the desire to know the secret plot that underpins the increasingly disturbing tangle of signs and events. On the face of it, for example, the offer of an engagement at Limmeridge House, which sets the story in mo-

tion, appears to be exceptionally "attractive" to Walter, as he informs us after his friend Pesca has spread out the prospective situation before him, "—and yet no sooner had I read the memorandum than I felt an inexplicable unwillingness within me to stir in the matter" (11). As in Walter's reading of the job memorandum, the process of reading Collins's story is accompanied by a disquieting intimation of potential meanings not yet divulged that seem to lurk "inexplicably" beside and beneath the evident surface "matter," warping and diverting the successive unwinding of the narrative's course.

Textually, the looming presence of this "unseen Design" (257) manifests itself in a flickering "twilight" (3, 262) and nervous delay, invoking an "ominous future, coming close" (257) whose very absence has so famously exerted its spectacular, "chilling" (257) grip on many readers' nerves.[7] Thus, during Walter's last night in London, when he leaves the house of his mother and sister, whom he has just bid goodbye, he does not go home straightaway, but hesitates and stops, feeling reluctant to go to bed, and finally decides to walk "by the most round-about way I could take" since this is the path he considers to agree best with his "restless frame of mind and body" (14). Winding his way "down slowly over the Heath"—the "prettiest part of my night-walk"—, then passing "through a by-road where there was less to see" (14), he eventually arrives at "that particular point of my walk where four roads met" (14-15). Walter is deeply immersed in his own thoughts by that time, mechanically turning towards London and wandering along the "lonely high-road," when he suddenly notices that in front of him, "in the middle of the broad bright high road," as he puts it, "there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments" (15). The encounter has become emblematic for the so called sensationalism of *The Woman in White* whose narrative ways are characteristically prone, at all events, to be obstructed and distracted by unforeseen hindrances, sudden turns or the thrilling apparition of figures seeming to spring "out of the earth," such as Anne Catherick in this scene or Count Fosco in a

later one, when he surprises Marian by turning round a corner "from the High Road" and suddenly standing before her "as if he had sprung up out of the earth" (245). Even on the "way to Knowlesbury," the novel's place of enlightenment, Walter is constantly pestered by two nameless spies, one of whom had just been passing "rapidly on his left side," when the other "sprang" to his "right side," as he tells us, "—and the next moment the two scoundrels held me pinioned between them in the middle of the road" (466). [8]

Certainly, then, the roads and ways of Collins's narrative are anything but a safe and clearly demarcated place. Instead they seem to be densely besieged, as it were, by other possibilities, lying in wait to unbalance the different first-person narrators who are attempting to walk, and thereby pave the textual paths. It is important, however, that these possibilities are generated by something that exists in an eminent mode of negativity or latency.[9] They are generated by something that seems not to exist, in other words, so that the very possibility of its sensational upsurge is precisely, if paradoxically, generated by what is apparently not known, not perceived or not in view. This trembling mood of impending revelations, latent possibilities and negative specificities manifests itself when Laura and Marian are out for a walk near Blackwater Park. Both women, in this instance, can perceive something or someone wandering about in the misty grounds around them, but neither of them is sure what it is exactly, whether it is a man or a woman, or just a product of their nervous fancy:

> "Hush!" she whispered. "I hear something behind us."
> "Dead leaves," I said, to cheer her, "or a twig blown off the trees."
> "It is summer time, Marian; and there is not a breath of wind. Listen!
> I heard the sound, too—a sound like a light footstep following us.
> "No matter who it is, or what it is," I said; "let us walk on […]." (239)

This may count as a typical passage because it captures the permanent feeling of "something behind" or around the characters—no "matter who it is or what it is"—accompanying them in terms of an indeter-

minate potential of mischief and covert activities whose exact purposes and motives are still unclear. "In this dim light it is not possible to be certain," as Marian expresses it, unwittingly compressing the text's default mode into a single phrase (238). Something seems to be going on secretly, but one can never be quite sure what. It is wholly appropriate, therefore, that the novel is called *The Woman in White* because it is this emphasis on something that lacks colour and shape but appears to be positive that becomes embodied in the title character. In fact, from the moment of Anne's "sudden appearance in the road" which, to Walter's "rather startled" mind, seemed to be perfectly "empty the instant before I saw you" (16), the narration proceeds in the lingering presence of something conspicuously, almost tangibly absent that tends to obfuscate and blur the meaning of whatever there is to read or understand. Importantly, this want of insight also questions the accuracy of Hartright's narrating voice, as he walks "on together" (17) with the white woman "whose name, whose character, whose story, whose objects in life, whose very presence by my side," as he wonders, "were fathomless mysteries to me" (18). From this moment, then, the narrating of the story is literally accompanied by an intellectual deficiency, an experience not, or not fully, understood, a crime not noticed, a blank not filled, a metaphorical whiteness that mars the evidence and the reliability of what is deemed to be positively known.

> It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally-domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage? (18)

After the woman in white has dramatically appeared in the middle of the road, the familiar ways of making and perceiving the world can no longer be trusted. Entering the narrative highway through a "gap in the hedge" (16), Anne's white figure cuts open the possibility of other, alternative stories, suggesting that even the conventional and domestic may not be what it appears to be. Having just escaped from a medical asylum, her appearance shows the accepted sphere of regu-

larity, order and control to be simultaneously inhabited by a subsidiary world of irregularity, disorder, madness and doubt.

As a consequence, the established framework of Walter's world-picture becomes increasingly shaken, as he subsequently embarks on his new job as drawing-master at Limmeridge house, causing his narrative imagination to grow almost as hazy as the water-colour portrait by means of which he attempts to re-create the first "vivid impression produced" on him "by the charm" of Laura Fairlie's "fair face and head, her sweet expression" (42) and, above all, her "lovely eyes" with their "clear truthfulness of look" that evokes nothing less than the ideal "light of a purer and a better world" (41). Symptomatically, in Walter's perception, Laura's "fair, delicate" demeanour (41) with her "faint and pale" coloured hair and her "truthful innocent blue eyes" is suffused with something remarkably enigmatic. The eyes shed a "charm—most gently and yet most distinctly expressed" over her "whole face" that "so covers and transforms its little natural human blemishes elsewhere, that it is difficult to estimate the relative merits and defects of the other features" (41). As a description this remains notably nondescript: the individual characteristics of Laura's figure seem to be veiled by a vague allure that is effectively not characterised, and the "relative merits and defects" of her "features" are covered and transformed by something that does, by itself, not feature among them. The fineness and beauty of Laura, it seems, is inextricably linked to a tendency of letting her disappear; for the vivid account of her presence is overshadowed by an unaccountable manifestation of absence, a dislocating "sensation" of a sense not located ("out of place") (42), ultimately suggesting no more than the bewildering "idea of something wanting" (42), but evidently not there. "At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought" (42). Paradoxically, then, Laura's character contains a component that it does not contain and yet unavoidably seems to call up. "Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was and what it was I could not say" (42). This obvious lack in Laura's appear-

ance—"an incompleteness which it was impossible to discover" (42)—turns out to be a key element, or rather non-element, in the development of the narrative because what is missing in Laura is precisely what eventually helps Walter recognise an "ominous likeness" between her and another woman who she might well be taken to be, namely Anne Catherick, the mysterious woman in white. "That 'something wanting' was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House" (51). What Laura, by herself, is actually not, is precisely what, by others, she may potentially be imagined to be. What distinguishes her is also what makes her resemble another. What specifies her is the very lack of specificity that makes her appearance slide so easily into that of Anne Catherick, blurring the boundaries between the individual selves of Laura and Anne. The two women are alike precisely because neither of them is distinct enough by herself. The elusive connection between the two women thus turns into the missing link that makes possible the transformation of their identities which the narrative, as arranged by Hartright, purports to clear up.

IV. Possible Plots

As mentioned in the preamble, the creation and dismantling of this plot has often been regarded as the engine that drives Collins's art. Rather than in the "construction of sensational plots," however, a much more subtle achievement of novels like the *Woman in White* is to be found in what Ronald R. Thomas has called their "conversion of character into plot" (63). Indeed, the person that Laura so manifestly fails to be is exactly what the narrative's criminal plot wickedly intends her to become. Laura is to be made Anne. Consequently, this plot, invented and enacted by the archvillain Count Fosco in cooperation with his wife and Percival Glyde, involves "nothing less than the complete transformation of two separate identities" (559), as he puts it in his own narrative. A rich, married lady is transformed

into a poor inmate of a madhouse and vice versa, each assuming an identity that is obviously not her own, but that she secretly already seems to possess. For what each of them is not, is nevertheless what their mutual resemblance has suggested them to be taken for. Fosco's conspiracy realises a possible fictional world that the actual fictional world already appears to include. What Walter's world conjures up in terms of an evocative lack, is what Fosco's world tries to make real.

More significantly still, this plot within the plot is itself designed to conceal yet another secret plot. It has been invented by Sir Percival in order to hide his illegitimate birth, the discovery of which would have completely robbed him of his title and wealth. Trying to avert this discovery, Percival manipulates the marriage records and turns himself into the lawful heir of someone who is not his father, thus providing himself with a full genealogy, identity and social existence that is not his own. He bases his life on a lie, on a connection not made, pretending to be someone who does not exist. The disclosure of this plot, of course, would have totally and immediately ruined him; therefore, as soon as he suspects Laura, who has become his wife by now, to have come to know his secret, he conspires with Fosco to exchange her identity with that of Anne Catherick. In this way, passing off his wife for a madwoman, he has her shut up in an asylum, while his secret remains hidden.

Ultimately, the motivation and execution of this whole fraud is revealed. In the second half of the novel, Walter, resuming his narrative after his return from South America, assumes the role of an amateur detective, restoring everyone to their true identity. For this purpose, he hunts down a number of written documents, including, among others, the personal statements of Count Fosco and Mrs. Catherick, Anne's mother, as well as an authentic copy of the forged marriage register in which a blank space, a marriage not entered, proves Percival's crime. Altogether, these documents eventually enable Walter to make an official presentation, supervised by Mr. Kyrle, the "legal adviser of the family" (576), in which the whole plot is laid open and the case declared closed. Therefore, the novel we hold in our hands

might be read as a retrospective arrangement of exactly these legal proofs, detailing the background, planning and intricate plotting of the case in terms of "one complete series of events," to come back to Walter's introductory lines. Indeed, for many critics the achievement of Collins's art mainly consists in the entertaining architecture of his novel. What defines *The Woman*, according to this view, is that the text's apparently inscrutable flurry of signs, puzzles, particulars and possible insinuations is always underpinned by a coherent logic of events. The novel forces its readers through a nerve-racking mist of seemingly confusing details but actually never loses control of its plot. "At the end comes the explanation," an anonymous reviewer writes in the *Saturday Review* (25 August 1860). "The secret spring is touched—the lock flies open—the novel is done" (Anonymous 83).

Again, I would like to contest such readings. They presuppose that Walter himself, in his function as chief editor, plays by the rules of the same law that he uses to model his narrative case. There is, however, a fair amount of textual evidence that strongly discredits the propriety of Walter's editing, pointing to an immense potential of further secrets and unexplained cases that a restricted focus on the official plot version he presents us with must unfortunately discard. Therefore, contrary to an exclusive "reading for the plot," as Peter Brooks calls it, I would rather draw attention to the possible side paths and by-ways of interpretation, the "catalysts" (Barthes 112) or "satellites" (Chatman 54), like the little lake at Blackwater Park, that point out towards the potentially fertile, though unknown, territory off the high road of what common sense calls the main plot. In this sense, Fosco's insistence on the existence of unreported crimes may also be read as a methodological call for a hermeneutics of suspicion, deliberately exploring what is not necessary for comprehending the story, but may still be part of the text. Most irritatingly, for example, judging from Walter's account, it is anything but plain that it is indeed Laura rather than Anne who has been rescued from the asylum to live in London with Marian and Walter, as his narrative would have us believe, and that it is Anne rather than Laura who has died in the course of the

exchange, now lying buried in Limmeridge churchyard under the name of "'Laura, Lady Glyde'" (378). In fact, there are several indications that make us distrust Walter's version. For instance, although eagerly protesting that "not the shadow of a suspicion" ever crossed his mind that the surviving woman really is the one whom everyone else firmly believes to be dead (380), Walter nonetheless admits that the "fatal resemblance" between Laura and Anne, formerly existing "in idea only" has now become "a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my eyes" (400), as he puts it. "Strangers, acquaintances, friends even who could not look at her as we looked, if she had been shown to them in the first days of her rescue from the Asylum, might have doubted if she were the Laura Fairlie they had once seen, and doubted without blame" (400). If nobody except for Walter and (according to Walter's account) Marian is inclined to believe that the woman in question is the one Walter says she is, and if, what is more, everybody is justified in not believing it, why should the reader accept it?

There are, in fact, many signs suggesting that Walter is not a trustworthy advocate of what commonsense may acknowledge as truth. For example, there is something patronisingly protective in the way he describes Laura's appearance and behaviour after she has been released from the asylum, rendering her kinship with Anne suspiciously close indeed. Walter repeatedly emphasises the childlike helplessness, innocence and fragility of Laura, her "weakened, shaken faculties," her "poor weary pining eyes" as well as "the faltering touch" and "feeble hand" that seems to be in constant need of guidance and support (400). Moreover, carefully trying to reawaken her lost memory and sense of personal identity, to fill "the blank in her existence" (400), Walter and Marian nurse her rather like a child than an adult woman in possession of her intellectual capacities and strength:

> We helped her mind slowly by this simple means; we took her out between us to walk, on fine days, in a quiet old City square, near at hand, where there was nothing to confuse or alarm her; […] we amused her in the evenings

> with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints […] by these and other trifling attentions like them, we composed her, and steadied her […]. (400-01)

Certainly, it does not require much effort to associate this pitiful creature with the "poor helpless woman" that has earlier been introduced under the name of Anne Catherick (92), a "half-witted," faint and "half-frightened" "child whose mental faculties had been in a disturbed condition from a very early age" (495, 50, 116) and whose "intellect is not developed as it ought to be at her age" (49). And even though we may easily attribute these "symptoms of mental affliction" (116) in both women to their common experience of being wrongly confined in an asylum, this does nothing to disclaim that, by the third epoch, they seem to have become one and the same person.

The only way to distinguish them is to rely on the authority of Walter's judgement, but, again, Walter, himself a mentally weak and traumatised man, is not at all credible.[10] He does not, for example, have any scruples in openly deceiving Laura, pretending that he was selling her "poor, faint, valueless sketches" of painting (442), as he calls them, just to make her feel she is doing something useful. Likewise, Walter does deliberately not tell Mrs Clements "the whole truth" (422) when he asks her to provide him with the information he needs; he modifies an important statement by Pesca, declaring that he repeats it with "the careful suppressions and alterations which the serious nature of the subject" required (534), and even Marian's diary report is not reproduced in its original form but only in terms of the notes Walter "wanted" to take when Marian read to him from her "manuscript," the original version of which she prefers to keep private due to a number of delicate passages significantly relating to Walter himself (401). The novel abounds with such apparently minor remarks, fuelling endless speculations on whether the plot actually did develop the way the text makes us believe. Does the unpublished part of the diary perhaps include any disreputable details about Walter that would further disparage the integrity of his character and his editing? We shall never know, just as we shall never know whether

any of the diary notes may count as authentic at all, even if we evaluate them exclusively within the set-up of the fictional world. In fact, there is something inherently doubtful about these notes, as I would finally like to show, that undermines the whole claim of legal truth upon which this fictional world is based.

The last piece of the Blackwater Park journal includes the record of how Marian, crouching on the roof of the house's veranda, eavesdrops on Percival and Fosco sitting below (289-305). This report is followed by an entry, headed "JUNE 20TH—Eight o'clock" (305); that is meant to account for the way the writing of the foregoing passages has been accomplished. It completely fails to do so, however, because what Marian, "drenched to the skin" from the rain, "cramped in every limb, cold to the bones" (306), has actually noted down is only that she is completely unable to remember clearly what has happened since she re-entered her room to write down what she has found out. Instead, she is overcome by a strong fever which seriously affects her mental faculties: "My head—I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together […] and the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head——" (307). These are Marian's last lines, after them, the "Diary ceases to be legible," as we are informed by a "Note" that is attached in brackets. Following this note, however, is a Postscript by Count Fosco in which he enthusiastically praises, among other things, "the marvellous accuracy of her report of the whole conversation" (308) between him and Percival and "the wonderful power of memory" that the whole diary displays (308). The irony of this is unmistakable, for Fosco is, of course, the last person to be trusted as a reliable "witness" (308) to these matters. Rather, knowing that he has pried into the privacy of Marian's writing table, a host of completely different, though speculative interpretations suggest themselves: Did Fosco modify or censor the contents of the journal, adapting them to his own needs? Or did he use his extraordinary knowledge of "medical and chemical science" (560) to start off Marian's illness or affect her consciousness and memory, making her imagine things that never happened the way they are

presented by the text? As Fosco freely confesses to be fully capable of transforming the physical conditions of mental activity, this seems not at all far-fetched.

> Give me—Fosco—chemistry; and when Shakespeare has conceived Hamlet, and sits down to execute the conception—with a few grains of powder dropped into his daily food, I will reduce his mind, by the action of his body, till his pen pours out the most abject drivel that has ever degraded paper. (560)

This is suggestive of what might have happened when Marian returned to her room "to execute the conception" of what she has heard on the roof outside, justifying the conclusion that parts of the diary have not been written by her conscious self. Having begun in this way, we may also wonder whether "chemistry" or mesmerism rather than marriage has been the cause for the "wonderful transformation" of Eleanor Fairlie, a talkative, "pretentious" (194) and "wayward Englishwoman" into the "civil, silent, unobtrusive" bore—"as cold as a statue"—(195) that we get to know as Madame Fosco, the Count's wife. None of the alternative stories that are implied by such hints is ever made explicit, and there is no point in developing them in great detail here. The point is precisely that they are not developed in great detail. They are realised as possibilities, as possible stories that might have been (more extensively) narrated and, for that matter, as possible stories whose meaning is yet to be explored by responding to the novel's secret dimension, to what it does not say. The point, in short, is that these alternative stories are realised as possible ways of reading, interpreting and re-writing Collins's text.[11]

In a historical perspective, namely in terms of evolutionary theory—which was one of the most influential theoretical paradigms during the latter half of the nineteenth century—we may also say that these alternative stories are realised as apparently minor interpretative variations, yet encouraging ever fresh selections of what the text can potentially come to mean as it is adapted to different hermeneutic horizons or contextual fields.[12] "Nature has so much to do in this

world," Hartright's text says at an early point in the narrative, "and is engaged in generating such a vast variety of co-existent productions that she must surely be now and then too flurried and confused to distinguish between the different processes that she is carrying on at the same time" (38). If *The Woman in White* represents "Nature" in any respect, then it is in this. It represents "Nature" as an emergent structure of possible plots, "a vast variety of co-existent productions," simultaneously vying for precedence. This, however, suggests an even more wide-ranging conclusion, that I can only refer to very briefly here. It suggests that the nature of evolution may be regarded as a model for Collins's text (and for later nineteenth century narrative fiction in general) precisely because this nature potentially includes what the law of its gradual development actually seems to exclude, namely the alternative ways of this development. In Darwin's *Origin*, these alternative trajectories, the roads not taken by the evolution of life, figure prominently, if negatively, in the shape of the traces of extinction that mark our geological record, silently gesturing at the numerous "less improved and intermediate forms" that might have stayed alive but did not (Darwin 128). Yet, while the law of organic life, according to Darwin's theory, characteristically consist in rejecting these "less-favoured" variants (Darwin 320) for the benefit and survival of the better adapted kinds, one law of literary fiction is to revive them, to have them re-enter the natural world in the shape of possible alternatives, appealing, as E. S. Dallas puts it, "to what I may call the absent mind, as distinct from the present mind, on which falls the great glare of consciousness, and to which alone science appeals" (1: 316).

In a more contemporary perspective, namely as a specific function of all fictional texts, these disregarded details, nascent possibilities and negative narratives, may also be seen in terms of what William R. Paulson and others have called the "noise" of communication. For, according to Paulson, literary fictions, in contrast to other cultural forms of communication, do characteristically not attempt to eliminate or "reduce noise to a minimum," but rather to integrate it into their

syntactical arrangement, assuming it as "a constitutive factor" of their successive self-constitution (83) that proportionally enhances the scope and intensifies the effect of their possible meanings as long as they continue to be read, interpreted and discussed. Of course, this is a general theorem that may be applied to all works of literary fiction. But in *The Woman in White*, such perpetual propensity towards structural instability complicating the regular or 'lawful' communication of a single message is even represented on the level of the story. This is evident in the lake episode that I have dealt with. But it also becomes apparent in the delicate condition of Mr. Fairlie's notorious "nerves" whose "wretched state" makes them exceptionally sensitive to the intrusion of noise or "loud sound of any kind" (33), threatening to disturb the "deep silence" (32) of his thickly carpeted room in the recess of Limmeridge House. It is significant that the seclusion and stillness of Mr. Fairlie's residence—a "large, lofty room with a magnificent carved ceiling"—is highly reminiscent of a museum of art and antiquities, a showroom of valuables, densely "occupied" with old and luxurious objects, such as "a long book-case of some rare inlaid wood," "statuettes in marble," "two antique cabinets" (31), "a picture of the Virgin and Child" and several costly and ornate stands, "loaded with figures in Dresden china, with rare vases, ivory ornaments, and toys and curiosities that sparkled at all points with gold, silver, and precious stones" (31-32). It is significant that the room is thus "adorned" (31) because in this way it suggests itself to be read as a metaphor of art and fiction, displaying a remarkable "structure of double meaning" (Iser, "Fictionalizing" 965) that exists in two worlds at the same time (cf. Lotman 96).[13] On the one hand, the 'room' of fiction represents a constructed space of "profound seclusion" (32), a non-natural reality that is just as separate from the real world as the softly lit chamber of Mr. Fairlie—an effeminate 'fairy' man by name and appearance—where "the windows were concealed and the sunlight was tempered by large blinds" (32). On the other hand, the exposed peculiarity and distinction of fictional literature, its obvious lack of necessity as well as the 'nervous' shakiness of its truth claims,

the unreliability of its laws and the secrecy of its full meaning make it particularly susceptible to impulses from the real world that simultaneously tend to enrich and destabilise its semantic identity, just as the sound of the "horrid children," that Mr. Fairlie supposes to enter his room from the garden "below," immediately turns his touchy nerves into a jumble of "helpless alarm" (35), unsettling the room's affectionate "halo of repose" (32). In relation to the careful order of Fairlie's room, then, "such brats" as "the children from the village" (36) represent a natural world of mere tumult and row that makes him advocate nothing less than "a reform in the construction of children. Nature's only idea seems to be to make them machines for the production of incessant noise" (36). Appropriately, therefore, Fairlie expressly prefers the mechanical artifice of celestial harmony, as encapsulated in "the conventional cherubs of Italian Art" (36) in one of his Raffaello paintings that lacks the very possibility of assuming and transforming noise:

> "Quite a model family!" said Mr. Fairlie, leering at the cherubs. "Such nice round faces, and such nice soft wings, and—nothing else. No dirty little legs to run about on, and no noisy little lungs to scream with. How immeasurably superior to the existing construction!" (36)

Paradoxically, what, from the point of view of Fairlie's selfish aestheticism, makes this artistic model of a family "immeasurably superior" to its real life analogue is also what, from the point of view of a real life reader, makes it inferior to an actual family. What, according to Fairlie's art world, defines the children's perfection is exactly what, according to our human world, defines their imperfection ("No […] legs"; "no […] lungs"). What provides them with their formal quality is exactly what deprives them of their human capacities. What, in Fairlie's eyes, renders them "nice" and "round" and "soft" is what, in our eyes, threatens to render them lifeless. The important point to note, then, is that Fairlie's reading of the painting strips it of its ability to transcend its actual surface design and represent a possibly real world. As he reduces the cherubs to the artificial construct of an ideal

family "and—nothing else," he ironically precludes their ability to become a "model" of human reality. Limiting the image's sole virtue to the properties it does not have, he simultaneously curtails the potential of meaning that may be generated by this very want. In this way, Fairlie arrests the picture's negative mimesis. He frames it as a nature not made, complaining that its actual "construction" does not exist, instead of imagining it as one that might exist. He conserves the impossibility of the painting's world reference, praising what is actually not real about it, instead of adapting it to a set of possibly real contexts which it could evoke. Consequently, his reading turns the art work into a mere object that lacks the energy-transforming and noise-converting organs which would help it develop a meaningful life of its own. Read in Fairlie's way, art works are destined sooner or later to fall into a state of oblivion and neglect because when their meaning is too rigidly fastened into a single framework, it is likely to be kept away from the various environmental stimuli that may potentially modify and enliven it.

This allows for a final conclusion. What ultimately keeps works of fiction and art alive is not their conservation in a single state that closes them off from all external impulses, as the ones in Fairlie's room; rather, it is their exposure to the possibility of being accommodated to contextual readings and requirements of various kinds. It is fitting, in this respect, that the "duty" Hartright is officially expected to "perform" at Limmeridge House is not only to "superintend the instruction of two young ladies in the art of painting in water-colours," but also, more significantly, "to devote his leisure time, afterwards, to the business of repairing and mounting a valuable collection of drawings, which had been suffered to fall into a condition of total neglect" (10). The way Walter is meant to engage with Fairlie's art works, then, is a kind of allegory of the way *The Woman in White*, as I have tried to demonstrate, suggests itself to be read. It suggests itself to be read in an active way that does not just preserve what the novel's discourse seems to say, but that generates possible interpretations of what it does not say. It suggests itself to be read in a

way that complicates the reliability of the official story the text purports to convey. Just as Fairlie's pictures require "careful straining and mounting" (35), so Collins's novel, I have argued, should not just be consumed for its gripping story and then be let to fall into "a condition of total neglect." Instead, it also deserves to be explored for the roads apparently not taken by Walter's editing, for the alternative readings and the possible secrets not covered by his narrative law.

In the end, fictional narratives that are read merely for the detection of a particular plot often leave their readers in a state of lingering dissatisfaction that is then typically, if only temporarily, cured by the consumption of similar stories.[14] One reason for this dissatisfaction, I suspect, is that the establishment of a plot presupposes a constructive activity that is necessarily somewhat destructive at the same time. Indeed, in order to arrive at a final explanation for all the details that we encounter in the course of reading a fictional text, we have to pass over a great amount of missing elements, adding causal links and motives that the text does not explicitly provide, while, conversely, we tend to overlook a great amount of information that the text explicitly provides but that is not needed for the construction of a plot. In this way, steadily grouping, selecting and combining, we may well be able to set up a conclusive series of actions and events, "nice and round" like the faces of Fairlie's cherubs, but, as with these, the conclusiveness of this series of actions and events is premised upon the silencing of that which does not seem to be included in the frame of the plot. No fictional world can ever be as comprehensive and conclusive as the actual one; hence, whenever we endeavour to resolve its possibilities into a single conclusion, we curb the text's capacity to serve as a model of the actual or real and eliminate its elements of messiness and noise. Certainly, with *The Woman in White* such readings bereave the text of its ability to signify liveliness and zest, reducing it to a mechanical pattern, bereft of "lungs" and "legs" like Fairlie's disabled angels, instead of having it become invigorated by what it does not overtly say but might covertly still hold in store. "The remaining hours of the morning passed away pleasantly enough," Walter writes

after his interview with Mr. Fairlie, "in looking over the drawings, arranging them in sets, trimming their ragged edges," and yet all of this is just part of "the necessary preparations" to be accomplished "in anticipation of the business of mounting them" (37). The critical work of engaging with a work or text, the "business of mounting," we may gather from this, begins only when we have already become familiar with the basic outline of its contents. It starts where the main plot stops.

University of Exeter
Exeter, Devon

NOTES

[1]This essay is a substantially revised and extended version of a paper given at the 10th *Connotations* Symposium on "Roads Not Taken," Tübingen and Freudenstadt, August 2-6, 2009. I thank the participants of the conference, the organisers Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, and, especially, an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and criticism.

[2]All text references to *The Woman in White* are to this edition.

[3]On the positivity of law see Luhmann (159-226). I should add, however, that this essay is emphatically not meant as an attempt to apply Luhmann's theory of law as a social system to literature.

[4]On the relationship between fictionality and narrativity see Erchinger, *Kontingenzformen* (41-58).

[5]This quotation comes from the text announcing the conference that eventually gave rise to the present essay.

[6]For further treatment of this issue see also Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* in which he draws on a wide range of narratives, especially biblical ones, to make his point.

[7]*The Woman in White* was immensely popular, when it was first published, as John Sutherland notes in the introduction to his Oxford edition. "Never before, it seems, had a work of fiction so caught the public's fancy," inspiring nothing less than "what would nowadays be called a sales mania and a franchise boom" (vii). Much of the book's appeal has remained unmitigated today. The quotations at the beginning of this paragraph are taken from a passage in Marian Halcombe's part which may be quoted as an example for the general atmosphere of nervous tension that characterises the whole novel: "I felt the ominous future, coming close; chilling me with an unutterable awe; forcing on me the conviction of an

unseen Design in the long series of complications which had now fastened round us" (257).

[8]"The genre [of the sensation novel]," D. A. Miller writes, "offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the nervous system" (146). Because sensation seems to be something that is primarily *received*, though, Miller points out, it has often been refused to be *read*, which is why the sensation novel has been "relegated to the margins of the canon" (147). Contesting this refusal to read sensation, Miller argues that it is important to take into account "the novel's implicit reading of its own (still quite 'effective') performative dimension" (149). Although his interpretation of *The Woman in White* focuses specifically on the relationship between sensation and gender, it may certainly complement mine. For an introduction to the historical dimension of the genre see Nemesvari and Pykett.

[9]For an overview of this theme see the essays in Budick/Iser.

[10]On this point, see also Hutter "Fosco Lives!" This essay collects a large amount of textual evidence to demonstrate "the gradual breakdown of Walter's clarity of purpose, even his clarity of mind, as the novel moves toward his encounter with Count Fosco" (212). Ultimately, Hutter argues that Fosco does not die at the end of the novel, as Walter tells us. Even this, it seems, is a legitimate possibility.

[11]One of the most fascinating contemporary re-writings of Collins's novel is Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*, first published in 2002, which explicitly develops many of the themes and elements that are implicit in *The Woman in White*. For example, Waters's novel dwells wittily on how exactly the doctors, who had to supervise and confirm Laura's referral to the asylum, are made to believe that she is mentally ill, a detail that Collins's text quickly circumvents by referring to Laura's complete, but rather unjustified, loss of memory (443).

[12]Extensive and well-argued treatment of the impact of evolutionary theory on nineteenth century literature is offered by Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists*, two books which have by now, and rightly so, become classics in Victorian studies. For an example of the interaction between evolutionary psychology and literary fiction see Erchinger, "Nascent Consciousnesses, Unaccountable Conjunctions: Emergent Agency in Herbert Spencer's Principles of Psychology and George Eliot's Daniel Deronda."

[13]A more extensive treatment of some of the theoretical issues related to this claim can also, for example, be found in Iser's *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* and in Lobsien (31-49; 172-74).

[14]I owe this point to Maurice Charney.

WORKS CITED

Barthes, Roland. "Einführung in die strukturale Analyse von Erzählungen." *Das semiologische Abenteuer*. Trans. Dieter Hornig. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988. 102-43.

Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

Bourne-Taylor, Jenny. *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth Century Psychology*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984.

Budick, Sanford and Wolfgang Iser, eds. *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.

Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. Ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith. London: OUP, 1975.

Dallas, E. S. *The Gay Science*. 2 vols. London: Chapman & Hall, 1866.

Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition*. Ed. Ernst Mayr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1964.

Erchinger, Philipp. *Kontingenzformen: Realisierungsweisen des fiktionalen Erzählens bei Nashe, Sterne und Byron*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

——. "Nascent Consciousnesses, Unaccountable Conjunctions: Emergent Agency in Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*." *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* 1.1 (2009): 1-19. 10 Apr. 2010 <http://www.skase.sk>.

Hutter, A. D. "Fosco Lives!" *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 195-238.

Iser, Wolfgang. "Fictionalizing: The Anthropological Dimension of Literary Fictions." *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 939-55.

——. *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre: Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991.

Kermode, Frank. "Secrets and Narrative Sequence." *Pieces of My Mind: Essays and Criticism 1958-2002*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 160-81.

——. *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979.

Levine, George. *Darwin and The Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988.

Lobsien, Eckhard. *Imaginationswelten: Modellierungen der Imagination und Textualisierungen der Welt in der englischen Literatur 1580-1750*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003.

Lotman, Jurij. *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*. München: Fink, 1989.

Luhmann, Niklas. *A Sociologocal Theory of Law*. Trans. Elizabeth King and Martin Albrow. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Nemesvari, Richard. "'Judged by a Purely Literary Standard': Sensation Fiction, Horizons of Expectation and the Generic Construction of Victorian Realism." *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. Ed. Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006. 15-28.

Paulson, William R. *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.

Pykett, Lyn. "Collins and the Sensation Novel." *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Jenny Bourne-Taylor. Cambridge: CUP, 2006. 50-64.

Sutherland, John, ed. Introduction. *The Woman in White*. By Wilkie Collins. Oxford: OUP, 1999. vii-xxiii.

Thomas, Ronald R. *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Cambridge: CUP, 1999.

"Unsigned Review." *Saturday Review* 25 Aug. 1860: 249-50. *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Norman Page. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974. 83-87.

Waters, Sarah. *Fingersmith*. London: Virago, 2002.