Writing Backwards—Writing Forwards:
A Response to Philipp Erchinger[*]

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> It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards.
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> Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, IV A 164

In his article "Secrets Not Revealed" Philipp Erchinger investigates what he himself calls (in the subtitle) "possible stories" in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, including both dead ends in the narrative progression and suggestions for alternative interpretations. Erchinger starts off his analysis with a discussion of the law metaphor that introduces the novel, pointing to the implicit contradiction of presenting the Law as unreliable, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, employing it as a model for the subsequent narrative, in a manner that I find perfectly persuasive. My following comments on the other sections of Erchinger's article are also intended to complement his observations rather than to refute them.

In his second chapter, Erchinger quotes a passage from *The Woman in White* in which Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco debate the suitability of a specific landscape as a murder site. This quotation is indeed intriguing—particularly since no murder is going to take place here or (as far as we can tell) elsewhere in the story, but to my mind this passage largely serves to establish Fosco as a new type of "realistic" villain (in spite of his nationality and aristocratic rank that are clearly indebted to the Gothic tradition) by contrasting him with Sir

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Percival as a representative of another conventional type of villain, the wicked squire of melodrama. While Sir Percival argues in favour of the suitability of the lakeside landscape as an appropriate scenery for the horrors of murder, Fosco claims its unsuitability on practical grounds, since it offers no opportunity for concealment. Collins thus establishes Fosco's credibility as a fictional character at the expense of Sir Percival—and indeed Fosco should prove the prototype of the modern villain. Sir Percival, it seems, is planning to *stage* a crime with all the appropriate scenic effects; Fosco, by contrast, is trying to *hide* it. The parallels to the declining genre of melodrama and the nascent genre of detective fiction are unmistakable. Fosco's claim concerning the abundance of undetected and even unsuspected crimes, for instance, was to become a commonplace of the "Golden Age" detective fiction of the early twentieth century.[1] Fosco also anticipates positions held in—and by—latter-day detective fiction in his stout refusal to consider crime from a moral point of view. This is the position held by Laura in the novel, and again Fosco's distinctive attitude is worked out and thrown into relief by contrasting him with another fictional character.

In his following subchapters III and IV, Erchinger points out several of the possible alternative readings suggested but never fully realized in *The Woman in White* and demonstrates convincingly how the narrative presents the various "roads not taken." He notes, for instance, that "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 Walter's narrative would have us believe, and that it is Anne rather than Laura who has died in the course of the exchange" (68-69) and suspects that the unpublished part of Marian's diary might include "disreputable details about Walter that would further disparage the integrity of his character and his editing" (70). Apart from Walter, Fosco may also have interfered as an uncalled-for editor to Marian's diary: "Did Fosco modify or censor the contents of the journal, adapting them to his own needs?" (71). Even if the diary has not been tampered with, it is unreliable, because at a crucial point of

the action"an entry, headed 'JUNE 20TH—Eight o'clock' […] that is meant to account for the way the writing of the foregoing passages has been accomplished […] completely fails to do so, however, because what Marian […] has actually noted down is only that she is completely unable to remember clearly what has happened" (71). Finally, even Fosco's death is uncertain, as Erchinger adds in a footnote that acknowledges the final claim of Hutter's article "Fosco Lives!" as "a legitimate possibility" (79n10).

This list is surely impressive and convincingly supports Erchinger's point concerning the multiple loose ends and unanswered questions within the novel. Something that also needs to be considered, however, is not *how* the text presents its multiple dead (or loose) ends but *why* there should be so many unrealized stories in *The Woman in White*. It would be tempting to read the numerous unrevealed secrets and dubious resolutions in the narrative as evidence of a new aesthetics that discards the contemporary ideal of the work of art as an organic whole as postulated, for instance, by Henry James in "The Art of Fiction": "A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts" (400). It is particularly tempting, since inconsistencies of plot would accord well with the fragmentation of narrative perspective that Collins first experimented with in *The Woman in White*.[2]

From a modern-day perspective his renunciation of the godlike omniscient authorial narrator seems to point in the same direction as an abandoning of plot coherence. Unfortunately, however, Collins's revisions of *The Woman in White* show that he was aiming at a greater consistency of plot and striving to eliminate the several gaps and contradictions caused by the method of composition peculiar to serial publication. For example, a review in the *Times* of 30 October 1860 had first pointed out a severe inconsistency in the novel's time scheme, which Collins attempted to correct in the 1861 version by setting back the relevant dates some 16 days.[3]

As Erchinger notes, critics and reviewers of *The Woman in White* have largely tended to stress Collins's close adherence to a preconceived plan—a myth that Collins himself was eager to perpetuate. The effect of serialization on the shape of the finished novel has already been discussed several times; but this has largely been done with respect to the necessity of creating suspense and introducing cliffhangers at regular intervals.[4] What I would like to argue in the following, however, is that the process of serialization of course largely prevented Collins from doing what he made Hartright do in the novel, namely revising and correcting the assembled material. As Collins's note at the head of the manuscript shows, the processes of the composition and publication of *The Woman in White* were overlapping: "I began this story on the 15th of August 1859, at Broadstairs, and finished it on the 26th July 1860, at 12 Harley Street, London. It was first published, in weekly parts, in 1859, and ending with the number for August 22nd 1860."[5] At various times in his later life, Collins gave contradictory accounts of the writing process of *The Woman in White*. Weighing the evidence, Sutherland doubts Collins's claim that "every work began with 'a mass of notes' in which the most minute details of the plot were foreseen with clairvoyant precision" (651), but comes to the conclusion that, in all likelihood, the process of composition and the process of publication occurred largely simultaneously: "From the internal evidence of the manuscript, it would seem that at the point when he actually began to put pen to paper, in August 1859, Collins was two or three months ahead of publication. According to a letter of 1865, 'When I sat down to write the seventh *weekly part* of *The Woman in White* the first weekly part was being published in *All the Year Round* and *Harper's Weekly*.' And as the narrative got under way the gap evidently closed to days. In the last instalments, he was in a neck-and-neck race with Sampson Low and the printers of *All the Year Round*" (651).

In his article, Erchinger expresses a scepticism concerning the truthfulness of an edited narrative that is perhaps typical of a present-day sensibility, voicing doubts concerning a single authoritative version

that may have extinguished traces of yet other, untold stories in the interest of greater coherence (70-71). Hartright's retrospective point of view and editorial intervention make his text an example of what Dennis Porter (in *The Pursuit of Crime*, drawing on Poe's comments on Godwin's *Things as They Are; or: The Adventures of Caleb Williams*) has called "backwards construction," a technique that is considered necessary in classical detective fiction of the "puzzle" type, and also a method contributing to the impression of the "wholeness" of a narrative. In a narrative constructed backwards, the plot assumes a certain providential quality: once we know the outcome of the story, all the events leading to it seem inevitable, even preordained. Moreover, all the events narrated seem to be *leading to* the inevitable and necessary end. This type of plot construction may have suited Victorian sensibilities—a reader of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, by contrast, may have a preference for a plot composed "forwards" with all the numerous crossroads—both literal and figurative—in the narrative where the action might take a different turn still visible in the text.

As suggested by the Kierkegaard quotation which I chose as a motto for these observations, telling a story backwards produces "meaning," whereas a story told forwards may seem more "true to life." Erchinger seems to express a preference for the latter type of narrative that does not finish with all the loose ends nicely tidied up: "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. 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. […] 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" (77).

While Erchinger locates the central tension in the narrative of *The Woman in White* between the preconceived plan or blueprint for the

novel and its execution ("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" [49]), I would argue that another central tension exists between the backwards construction carried out by Hartright and the necessity to present this construction in a narrative that Collins had to compose forwards due to the peculiarity of the publication process. As in the debate on crime sites and master criminals mentioned above, this tension is also mirrored in the text itself by means of a juxtaposition of fictional characters. While Hartright presents the art of backwards construction, Fosco is depicted as an example of the serial writer forced into a fury of composition in the final "neck-and-neck race" (to quote Sutherland's term) of the narrative; so it is clearly no coincidence that the following passage occurs towards the end of the novel:

> He dipped his pen in the ink, placed the first slip of paper before him with a thump of his hand on the desk, cleared his throat, and began. He wrote with great noise and rapidity, in so large and bold a hand, and with such wide spaces between the lines, that he reached the bottom of the slip in not more than two minutes certainly from the time when he started at the top. Each slip as he finished it was paged, and tossed over his shoulder out of his way on the floor. When his first pen was worn out, that went over his shoulder too, and he pounced on a second from the supply scattered about the table. Slip after slip, by dozens, by fifties, by hundreds, flew over his shoulders on either side of him till he had snowed himself up in paper all round his chair. Hour after hour passed—and there I sat watching, there he sat writing. He never stopped, except to sip his coffee, and when that was exhausted, to smack his forehead from time to time. One o'clock struck, two, three, four—and still the slips flew about all round him; still the untiring pen scraped its way ceaselessly from top to bottom of the page, still the white chaos of paper rose higher and higher all round his chair. At four o'clock I heard a sudden splutter of the pen, indicative of the flourish with which he signed his name. "Bravo !" he cried, springing to his feet with the activity of a young man, and looking me straight in the face with a smile of superb triumph. "Done, Mr Hartright!" (608-09)

A central operative image of the above passage obviously is the "white chaos of paper" Fosco has produced. As Erchinger demonstrates, the colour "white" is generally associated with danger and insecurity in the course of the novel. He speaks of the "metaphorical whiteness that mars the evidence and the reliability of what is deemed to be positively known" (64) and draws attention to the various blanks threatening the safety of several fictional characters. To Hartright, the woman in white Anne Catherick becomes a harbinger of danger: "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" (64). Laura's sense of identity is threatened by "the blank in her existence" (69), and "a blank space, a marriage not entered, proves Percival's crime" (67). It is in the passage quoted above that the fear of whiteness is finally revealed to be a special form of the *horror vacui*, the serial writer's fear of the blank page.

I would like to close on a more general observation: right at the beginning of his article, Erchinger makes a deliberate choice to focus on the process of reception—a choice that must of course be respected, but it might be fruitfully complemented by a focus on the process of production of the literary text. And there is also a stylistic phenomenon to which I would like to draw attention. Throughout Erchinger's article, but most conspicuously at the beginning and the end, agency is repeatedly ascribed to the literary text: "a novel […] repeatedly exposes, questions and reverts the tacit laws and premises upon which it seems to proceed" (51); "the text itself […] loudly and brashly answers to its unresolved function" (53); "literary fictions […] do characteristically not attempt to eliminate or 'reduce noise to a minimum'" (73); "the way *The Woman in White* […] suggests itself to be read" (76); and—maybe most tellingly, in a passage already quoted above: "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" (77). It has by now of course become customary to credit literary texts with agency—I have been doing the same at various points in the course of the present response; but still this habit perhaps ought to strike us as odd. The purpose of crediting the text with possessing agency is that it allows us to avoid speaking of authorial intention—another telling phenomenon in this context is the abundant use of the passive voice. Ever since Barthes's declaration of the "death of the author," literary critics have felt a profound embarrassment about discussing authorial intention. However, as I have tried to suggest by the preceding observations, overcoming this ancient taboo may allow us to discuss not merely *how* a text is producing its specific effects but also *why* this should be so.

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NOTES

[1]Cf., for instance, the opening discussion of Agatha Christie's "The Four Suspects" in her *The Thirteen Problems*.

[2]Critics, of course, were quick to contest Collins's claim that his narrative method was a genuine innovation by pointing out its similarity to the epistolary novel—see a review from the *Observer* of 27 August 1860.

[3]Cf. Kendrick 74.

[4]See, for instance, Hüttner, 29-30. See also Hüttner for further references.

[5]Cf. Sutherland 647.

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