

The Woman in White and the Secrets of the Sensation Novel*

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Philipp Erchinger's densely argued essay, "Secrets Not Revealed: Possible Stories in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*", which appeared in an issue of *Connotations* devoted to the theme of "Roads Not Taken," seeks to make Collins's text yield up some of those narrative or textual secrets that, as Frank Kermode maintains in his essay "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," are concealed by an author's efforts to "'foreground' sequence and message" (Kermode 88). Such secrets, Kermode argues, remain hidden to "all but abnormally attentive scrutiny" and are only brought to light by a "reading so minute, so intense and slow that it seems to run counter to one's 'natural' sense of what a novel is" (Kermode 88).

Erchinger is clearly an attentive reader. For example, he subjects a lakeside conversation between four of the protagonists at the beginning of the novel's "Second Epoch" to a longer and closer scrutiny than it has hitherto received (Erchinger 51-60)—a reading so minute, intense and slow that it runs counter to one's sense of what the experience of reading a sensation novel is. He is also an inventive reader who suggests that there is no good reason to suppose that it is Laura rather than Anne who escapes the plotters and marries Hartright. He seems to suggest that the concealment of this fact may not simply be a consequence of Hartright's evasiveness as a narrator, but rather is one of its motivating factors. Erchinger is, moreover, a resisting reader, who resists the lures of the sensation novel by rea-

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ding against the plot, or more specifically, against the idea of plot as a controlling device which conceals the plenitude of a novel's potential meanings. Instead, he seeks to analyse Collins's novel as "a highly intriguing fabric of individual fictional discourses, managed, manipulated and lined up by an equally fictional editor, Walter Hartright, whose true motives [...] must [...] necessarily remain [...], despite all his declarations to the contrary, fundamentally unreliable" (Erchinger 51). This response will suggest some other roads one might take through Collins's manipulations of Hartright's manipulations of this highly intriguing fabric of individual fictional discourses.

Erchinger's starting point is his observation that the novel's chief narrator, Hartright, uses "the machinery of the Law" (Collins 5) as "an operative framework for the whole novel", a "theoretical model [...] 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" (Erchinger 48). Much of the essay's subsequent argument turns on what Erchinger describes as the "irresolvable tension" (49) regarding the Law which, he argues, is established in Hartright's opening justification of his narrative method and is developed throughout the novel. This tension results, Erchinger suggests, from Hartright's presentation of the Law as, on the one hand, an "authoritative system of clarification and distinction," and, on the other, as so "highly unpredictable and erratic" in its operation, as to create "an uneasy feeling of hidden secrets and unresolved cases" (Erchinger 49). Erchinger sees this ambivalence with regard to the Law as self-consciously inviting a "theoretical comparison between the conduct of a legal investigation and a reader's construction of a narrative plot" (49).

The Law is not the only locus of tension or ambivalence introduced in Hartright's opening remarks on the narratives which constitute the text of *The Woman in White* (cf. "Preamble," Collins 5). Collins's chief narrator and self-appointed editor's justification of his narrative method also establishes a tension regarding the process of narration. Hartright insists that his chosen narrative method offers maximum

veracity and clarity: "No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence"; the task of narrator will be carried out by those "who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge [...] clearly and positively"; the purpose being to "present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" and "to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experience, word for word" (Collins 5-6). While Hartright appears to offer the ultimate in fictional realism as well as the forensic objectivity which is appropriate to a legal investigation or a "Court of Justice," the narratives that follow are, in fact, all limited and subjective. Moreover, while Hartright insists that his ordering of the narratives is designed to "trace the course of one complete series of events" as clearly as possible, Collins's construction and ordering of the narratives is designed to create and perpetuate the narrative secrets for as long as possible and to maximise the sensational effects of the sensation novel—"the whole interest of which consists in the gradual unravelling of some carefully prepared enigma," as one early commentator on the genre put it (*Spectator* 1428). Indeed, as U. C. Knoepfelmacher pointed out in his 1975 essay on *The Woman in White* and the "Counterworld of Victorian Fiction," Hartright's comparison of his method of assembling the narratives with the operations of a Court of Law is patently a false analogy. A trial in a Court of Law involves both "the knowledge of the offence and the offender" and "a detached, ex post facto analysis of events" (Knoepfelmacher 62). On the contrary, the "narrative strips" (Knoepfelmacher 62) assembled by Hartright draw readers into a shared time scheme with the characters who are involved in those events, and, for much of the narrative, readers share the ignorance of several of the narrating characters about the precise nature of the offence to which Hartright refers in his opening remarks. In other words, both readers and (for the most part) characters are "engaged in the narrative, not as impartial and objective judges but as subjective participants in a mystery," a mystery,

moreover, which is “based on the irrational suspicions of the [...] figure who has posed ... [in his introductory remarks] as a rational accuser before a rational court of law” (Knoepfmacher 62).

One might argue that the central tension in the novel is not, in fact, an “irresolvable tension” regarding the operations of the Law, but rather a tension between the Law—which is consistently presented as being compromised by “the money question,” as the lawyer Kyrle puts it (Collins 454)—and Justice. Crucially Hartright repeatedly presents himself as a fighter for Justice in the face of the unreliability of “the machinery of the Law.” Thus, for example, Hartright assures Kyrle that there “shall be no money-motive [...] no idea of personal advantage, in the service I mean to render to Lady Glyde,” and asserts that her persecutors “shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them” (Collins 454). Moreover, one of the lessons that Hartright presents himself as having learned in the course of the events narrated is that sometimes Justice can only be obtained outside of the operations of the Law. As he reflects towards the end of the narrative: “The Law would never have obtained me my interview with Mrs Catherick. The Law would never have made Pesca the means of forcing a confession from the Count” (Collins 636).

Like the ambivalence concerning the process of narration noted above, the tension between Law and Justice is established in the opening paragraphs of the novel in Hartright’s juxtaposition of the unreliable “machinery of the Law”—too often “the pre-engaged servant of the long purse” (Collins 5)—with the “Court of Justice.” It is, in fact the “Court of Justice” rather than, as Erchinger suggests, the operations of the “machinery of the Law” which Hartright invokes as an analogy for his narrative method. The narratives which he has gathered together are presented to readers who are to act as judge (and also, perhaps, as jurors). This type of legal analogy, as Jonathan Grossman notes in *The Art of Alibi*, was common in Victorian novels, which frequently “incorporated self-reflecting and self-defining analogies to the law courts” (Grossman 5). George Eliot, for example,

notably compared the form of the novel to a mirror, whose deflected and refracted reflections were to be described by the narrator “as precisely” as possible, “as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath” (Eliot 175). For Eliot, as for many of her contemporaries, “the law courts, understood as a containing structure for retelling stories, provided a constitutive way of imagining [the] novel’s form” (Grossman 4). Erchinger, on the other hand, interprets Hartright’s references to the “machinery of the Law” and the “Court of Justice” in the opening paragraphs of *The Woman in White* as referring to a “legal enquiry.” Such a process, he argues “is typically [...] carried out in order to reduce all the information to a single, unequivocal interpretation [...] [and 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” (50). Does this really describe the process of a Court of Law or Justice? In England a Court of Law is adversarial and involves advocacy. Forensic skills are used to interrogate evidence and witnesses, to find gaps in the stories they tell, to advocate alternative readings of the evidence and to tell alternative stories. This is an aspect of the operations of a Court of Justice on which Hartright does not dwell—yet another example of his narratorial evasiveness.

Hartright is, of course, as Erchinger notes, a notoriously unreliable narrator. Indeed, as Kermode reminds us in “Secrets and Narrative Sequence,” all narrators are unreliable, what is remarkable is that we should have “endorsed the fiction of the ‘reliable’ narrator” (Kermode 90). One of the most recent among the numerous critics to have explored Hartright’s unreliability is Maria Bachman, who sees his narrative manipulations, concealments and control of information as central both to the novel’s obsession with secrecy and to the way in which it keeps its secrets “hidden deep under the surface” (Collins 482). Bachman argues that Walter’s narrative method, which presents us with a series of narratives that “conceal far more than they reveal” (Bachman 90), is a metaphor for the way that all novels work: “the logic of novels is analogous to the logic of disclosing secrets” (Bach-

man 76). This is certainly the “logic” of the sensation novel. From its inception readers and reviewers of sensation fiction recognised that secrecy was not only the driver of its plots, but that it was also its theme or subject, and its fundamental “enabling condition” (Showalter 104). Indeed, one might argue that, particularly as practiced by Collins, the sensation novel goes out of its way to foreground the interconnectedness of its use of secrecy as a narrative device (to capture and keep the attention of readers) and its exploration of secrecy as a broader cultural phenomenon.

If the unreliable Hartright presents us with a series of narratives that conceal as much, if not more, than they reveal, he is nevertheless curiously open about his secretiveness. He frequently calls attention to his concealments and manipulations. Often the ostensible reason for the omission or editing of information is narrative clarity. Thus at the beginning of “The Third Epoch,” Hartright resumes his narrative one week after the sensational scene in which Laura appeared to him beside her own gravestone, noting that he must leave “unrecorded” the “history of the interval,” whose recollection makes his mind sink “in darkness and confusion” (Collins 420). Such emotion must be suppressed “if the clue that leads through the windings of the Story is to remain, from end to end, untangled in my hands” (Collins 420). Similarly, notwithstanding his opening claims about letting everyone “relate their own experience, word for word” (Collins 6), Hartright reveals his editing of the words of Laura and Marian, an act which he justifies in the interests of clarity: “I shall relate both narratives not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves, but in the words of the brief, plain, studiously simple abstract which I committed to writing for my own guidance, and for the guidance of my legal adviser. So the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled” (Collins 422).

In short, throughout, Walter openly suppresses details which he deems irrelevant to “this process of inquiry” (Collins 5), or “the Story” (Collins 5), often using the argument of clarity and rationality to justify his exclusions. But what is “the Story”? Is it the “plain narrative

of the conspiracy" (Collins 633) against Laura which Hartright carefully writes out for delivery to the tenants of the Limmeridge Estate towards the end of the novel? Or is "the Story" the one referred to in the novel's opening paragraph: "this is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve" (Collins 5)? Walter is the author of both stories, and both have their own concealments. The "plain narrative" (Collins 633), the result of the supposedly forensic untangling of the clues that lead through the windings of the labyrinth of the conspiracy, is merely reported to—rather than shared with—the readers. It is also self-confessedly partial, as it dwells "only on the pecuniary motive for [the conspiracy] in order to avoid complicating my statement by unnecessary reference to Sir Percival's secret," which would, Hartright notes, "confer advantage on no one" (Collins 634). The "plain narrative" is Laura's story. Its purpose is to re-establish her legal identity and restore her to her social position. Hartright's omissions, concealments and editing have the effect of making "the Story" his story. This story is not the forensic untangling of clues, but something altogether different. It is a story of providential transformation by sensational events. Thus, for example, Hartright's recording of the fact that he must leave unrecorded the events of the week following the sensational reunion at Laura's graveside, is followed by this proclamation: "A life suddenly changed—its whole purpose created afresh; its hopes and fears, its struggles, its interests, and its sacrifices, all turned at once and for ever into a new direction—this is the prospect which now opens up before me" (Collins 420).

In this declaration one of the textual secrets which Ann Cvetkovich has detected in *The Woman in White* erupts onto its narrative surface. This is the secret of the way in which many of the novel's more sensational moments "enable the more materially determined narrative of Walter's accession to power to be represented as though it were the product of chance occurrences, uncanny repetitions, and fated events" (Cvetkovich 111). Walter's ordering of his own and others' narratives is designed to tell the story of what "a Man's resolution can achieve"

in the form of a quest for Justice. However, this quest story masks (or is written over) another story, a Victorian story of self-help in which the quest for Justice serves also as a route to power, which allows the art teacher to marry the lady, despite the difference in their class status. As Cvetkovich argues, Hartright's presentation of his own and the other narratives that make up *The Woman in White* works to conceal the fact that his "pursuit of justice allows him to further his own interest" (Cvetkovich 111). Hartright's protestations about the Law's inadequacies thus act as a cover for the fact that it is precisely the inadequacies of "the machinery of the Law" which set him on a particular road. The road taken is the road of "opportunity" on which the uncovering of the secrets and crimes of aristocratic men such as Sir Percival and Laura's father allows him to ascend to the social position of which they proved themselves unworthy, and, in Glyde's case, occupied illegitimately.

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