

W I L K I E C O L L I N S

A C R I T I C A L S U R V E Y

O F

H I S P R O S E F I C T I O N

W I T H . A B I B L I O G R A P H Y

by

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A Thesis

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TO J. W. DANIEL

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

First of all I must pay tribute to the antiquarian booksellers of Britain who searched for and found for me Collins items and other works not easily come by; who sent these volumes to South Africa, often on approval and always on trust.

I should like to record my indebtedness to Kenneth Robinson for the clear and authentic picture of Collins in his WILKIE COLLINS : A BIOGRAPHY, and to Robert Ashley for his keen critical insight, especially as regards his discerning criticism of Collins's later novels and his appraisal of Collins as a writer. It seems to me a great pity that Ashley, in his WILKIE COLLINS, found it necessary to limit himself to less than one hundred and fifty pages. M.L. Parrish's WILKIE COLLINS AND CHARLES READE, though incomplete, was a mine of information.

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The excellent microfilm services of the British Museum, The Library of Congress and The University of Cape Town made research into the periodical publication

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of Collins's works less complicated than it would otherwise have been.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Wilkie Collins was born in London on the 8th January, 1824, the first child of William Collins, R.A. When he was seven years of age he won an essay prize at the Maida Hill Academy, a distinction which pleased him little, for he said in later life that it made enemies of all the clever boys and awoke the distrust of the dull ones. After more than two years on the Continent, most of which time was spent in Italy, the elder Collins painting there, Wilkie was sent to Mr Cole's Boarding School in Highbury, where, he tells us, he was forced to learn the art of story-telling upon pain of punishment from one of the seniors.

In 1841 he was apprenticed to Antrobus & Co., Tea Merchants, but spent most of his time away on holiday trips, several in Paris, or learning to write. The Last Stage Coachman (1843), the earliest article traced to Collins, was written while he was still with Antrobus & Co.

When he was twenty-two years of age he was enrolled as a law student at Lincoln's Inn, but studied little law. The death of his father ten months later, and an indulgent mother, made possible an easy life filled with dabbling in art, holiday excursions to France, writing, and 'indiscretions'.

In 1848 he published his Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A. and also found time to engineer the elopement of his friend, E.C. Ward, with a young girl sixteen years of age. By 1850 he had associated himself with the theatre, had translated a play from the French, had taken part in amateur theatricals and had published his first novel, Antonina.

The next year was the most important in his life. He published Rambles Beyond Railways, The Twin Sisters (the first short story traced), sat for Millais, was called to the Bar (though he was never to practise), and met Charles Dickens. By 1852 he was contributing to Household Words, and thus began an association which was to determine the course of his life. For many years he was on Dickens's staff, was to collaborate with him, to travel on excursions with him and to share what seem to be rather dubious adventures. A profusion of articles, short stories, novels and plays now flowed from his pen; and all the time he was experimenting with the various forms of his art until he formulated his dictum: Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait!" Collins does occasionally make us laugh; if he seldom manages to make us cry, his young men do seem to burst into tears upon the slightest provocation; but there can be no doubt that he mastered the art of making us wait.

When he was thirty-five Caroline Graves came to live with him. When she left eight years later to marry one Clow, he took up with Martha Rudd and, over a period of five years, had three children by her. Caroline had, however, returned in the interim and lived with Collins until his death.

Before he was forty years of age he began to suffer ill-health and was soon a victim of the frequent attacks of gout which were to lead him to resort to ever-increasing doses of laudanum.

In his early forties he struck up a friendship with Charles Reade which to influence materially the character of his later work.

His American Reading Tour in 1873, a fiasco compared with Dickens's conquests, preceded his gradual withdrawal from society. In spite of ill-health, he maintained his literary output until his death in 1889.

P A R T I

T H E P R E P A R A T O R Y E X A M I N A T I O N

i : The Problem

Wilkie Collins is best known as one who wrote mysteries; yet the mystery of Wilkie Collins himself in his life and his work, presents a more complicated tangle of threads than does The Moonstone or Armada. Unfortunately we are not able to proceed with Collins's systematic mastery and bring his own story to a similarly neatly rounded-off conclusion.

Wilkie Collins's life was a mass of paradoxes. He never married, but he lived as a married man and his novels show that he was much concerned with the inequity of the marriage laws of the time. He acknowledged three children by Martha Rudd as his, but did not have them in his home. It was Caroline Graves who lived with him, along with her daughter, Harriet; but Collins did not claim Harriet as his child. Yet in his will she was treated on a par with his own 'morganatic family' (as he preferred to call them) and he saw to it that she married well: which was something he did not do for Martha's offspring.

Perhaps the greatest puzzle of all, is his attendance at the wedding of Caroline Graves to a plumber, son of a distiller, after she and Collins had lived together for eight years. Less than three years later, the plumber is forgotten and Caroline is living once more in Collins's home with her daughter, to remain there till his death, when she inherited, with her daughter, half his estate. Six years later she was to be interred in

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his grave, the grave for which Martha Rudd had for some time been caring.

We look in vain to Collins himself for information. When he does provide a glimpse he is either disappointingly vague or circumspect, or most disingenuous. His own accounts of events vary materially: personal revelation was certainly not one of his strong points. Many of his friends who could have provided us with the answers to the riddle, preferred to remain silent. Charles Dickens destroyed the many letters which he must have received from Collins; and the letters from Dickens preserved by Collins make use of a 'code' which tantalisingly makes us suspect much, but which effectually prevents us from being able to throw much light on the adventures which it appears that they shared.

A study of Collins's work presents as many problems. He had the habit of re-publishing old stories with new titles. This is a cause of great confusion to anyone who, in later years, hunts for material not easily come by, only to find that much of this material is available from more accessible sources. American publishers further obscured the issue by bringing out piratically many of his novels and stories under any title they chose. In addition, much of his earlier work, including a good deal that he contributed to Dickens's Household Words, was printed unsigned. Furthermore, he and Dickens worked together on a number of Christmas Stories. Collaboration was at times so complete, as a result of working and seeking diversion together, that identification of the contributions of each cannot always be accurate. Indeed, Collins declared that it was "amusing to see the reviewers point out a passage of mine as an example of Dickens's peculiar vein, and in the next sentence comment on a paragraph of

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Dickens's as an example of Wilkie Collins's sensational style." ¹.

Nor does his work follow an easily recognisable pattern: there is no steady march of development to a culmination in his greatest works; still less is there a steady rise to a climax with a falling-off concomitant with waning powers, as some of his biographers have suggested. Surprisingly mature work is found among his early novels, and much of that which later writers were to draw upon or imitate was the work of a young man.

It has been suggested that his addiction to large doses of laudanum, his excesses in his youth, his physically inactive life, his suffering, caused by gout in the eyes and rheumatism, were the cause of the falling-off of his later work, but the best remains entangled with the worst to the very end; and the easy assumption that he lost his touch and his following, does not bear closer examination. His last novel, Blind Love, only two-thirds written at the time of his death and completed by Walter Besant, has an excellent plot, and was worked out in detail. While Dr Vimpany is no Count Fosco, he makes a most satisfactorily odious villain. This was the work of a man suffering torture from rheumatism, blinded by gout, coping with an attack of bronchitis and handicapped by the after-effects of a stroke.

To find the answer to this puzzle we must have recourse to Collins's antecedents, to what we know of him for fact, and what we can learn from the internal evidence of his work. This last can be a dangerous procedure, and one of his biographers has so far overstepped the limits of discretion that his life history of Collins, while making fascinating reading, is no history at all.

1. Quoted without a reference by M. Elwin :Victorian Wallflowers, p. 217.

On the other hand, there is plenty of verifiable evidence that Collins, more obviously than with most writers, wrote from his own experience or drew upon ascertainable sources. He did not possess the ability of synthesizing from varied observation; he had to have a model and events upon which to build and upon which to bring to bear his own peculiar virtues as a writer.

In Collins's work we look successfully for echoes of such personal experiences which we know did fall to his lot, and find clearly reflected opinions and attitudes which spring from the impact upon him of events and his relations with people. We find his characters in situations so strikingly similar to those in which persons closely associated with the most tantalizing passages of Collins's own life found themselves, that it seems reasonable to infer that these characters behave as did their counterparts in real life.

ii : Heredity

What hereditary and environmental influences are required to produce a Wilkie Collins? An Irish grandfather who earned a living as an art-dealer and wrote A Poem on the Slave Trade and a strange pot pourri called The Memoirs of a Picture, may have been the origin of Collins's determination to become a writer. A father who was a Royal Academician, was secretly proud of his son and had high hopes for him. He took him on landscape painting trips and on visits to the houses of the well-to-do with whom he associated. His mother had an associate of the Royal Academy for a father, a sister who was a well-known portrait painter, and a relative

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Alexander Geddes, who wrote books on theology. She was a woman of strong enough character to follow her fiancé to Edinburgh to marry him under Scottish law. She was to influence Collins all the days of her life. She quietly supported him when he was unenthusiastic about falling in with his father's wish that he take Holy Orders, and gave in to his eloquent entreaties for more funds to extend his holiday trips in France at a time when he should really been devoting himself to learning the tea business. She encouraged him in his ambitions to become a writer when he should have been reading law; and, after the death of her husband, provided for Collins while he was striving to earn a living by his pen.

iii : Environment

Wilkie Collins was born in London on January 8th, 1824, and was brought up under respectable middle class conditions. He won an essay prize at school at the age of eleven, and in the following year accompanied his parents on a Grand Tour of the Continent which was to last for three years. Most of this period was spent in Italy. On their return he was sent to a boarding school in Highbury, where he was compelled to tell stories to the senior boy in his dormitory after lights out. Collins wrote, "My tyrant made for himself a cat-o'-nine-tails and as often as my voice died away, he leaned across the bed and gave me a cut or two with it which started me afresh..... but I owe him a debt of gratitude, for it was this brute who first awakened in me a power of which, but for him, I might never have been aware. When I left school, I continued story-telling

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for my own pleasure." 1.

After he had successfully resisted attempts to persuade him to enter the Church or to read mathematics or classics, he was taken on as a clerk by a firm of tea importers on the understanding that he would be advanced as rapidly as possible. However, he spent much time that should have been devoted to his duties in planning trips to Paris and then putting these plans into execution. On his own admission he neglected his work to compose "tragedies, comedies, epic poems and the usual literary rubbish accumulated about themselves by young beginners." 2. "I had already begun to write in secret, and mercantile pursuits lost all attraction for me." 3.

Edmund Yates confirms that, while still in his teens, Collins wrote "a great deal for periodical publication", 4. and his father wrote from Oxford in 1844 asking his wife to cut out stories from the various publications and "send them by post directly." 5. In The Illuminated Magazine for August, 1843, we find The Last Stage Coachman, the first published work by Collins to have been traced. It seems reasonable to suppose that he was writing a great deal at this stage and that he achieved print fairly regularly; but, as anonymity was the general rule at the time, we cannot obtain any clear picture of the extent or nature of his writings.

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1. Wilkie Collins: Reminiscences of a Story Teller, Universal Review, London, May, 1888, p. 183.
2. Collins in a letter to Yates, quoted by Robinson, Wilkie Collins, p. 34.
3. Collins: Memorandum Relating to the Life and Works of Wilkie Collins (1862). (Quoted in Parrish: Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade, p. 4.
4. Ashley: Wilkie Collins, p. 20.
5. Robinson: op. cit., p. 35.

By January, 1844, his father had enough confidence in Wilkie's ability as a writer to record in his diary an expectation that his son would undertake to write the Memoirs of the father, and before 1846 Wilkie had written his first novel. All trace of this work has disappeared, but Collins himself tells us that no publisher in London would accept it. This is, perhaps, not surprising, because Collins himself describes it in these terms:

"The scene of the story is laid in the island of Tahiti, before the period of its discovery by European navigation. My youthful imagination ran riot among the noble savages, in scenes which caused the respectable British publisher to declare that it was impossible to put his name to the title page of such a novel. But I got over it and began another novel."

This next novel must have been Antonina because Collins informs us that,

"I had in the year 1847, completed the first volume of a classical romance, called Antonina; or the Fall of Rome - when my father died. I put aside the romance, to do honour to my father's genius, to the best of my ability, by writing the history of his Life and his pictures. This was my first published book."

iv : Stock-in-trade

It would be well at this stage to examine the equipment of this young writer for the task he had set himself. We already know that he was most knowledgeable about art; indeed he had a picture of his, "The Smuggler's Refuge", hung at the Royal Academy in 1848. In Italy he had accompanied his father to numerous churches and picture galleries; and he had also seen the picture galleries in England especially in the country houses to

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1. Appleton's Journal (N.Y.), 3rd Sept., 1870.
2. Wilkie Collins : Memorandum, given in Parrish, op. cit., p. 4.

which his father took him. Collins was to learn much about the way of life of the great in the land and the persons who crawled contemptibly to sup at the rich man's table. Even in his earlier work he was able to write of young gentlemen and gentlemanly rogues and especially of young gentlewomen in a way which Dickens could never emulate.

Of his travels on the Continent when he was thirteen, Collins said "I learnt more which has since been of use to me, among the pictures, the scenery and the people, than I ever learnt at school." ¹. He had also an intimate knowledge of London, and of Hampstead Heath where they took a cottage in the summer. This knowledge he was to make such good use of in Basil (1852) that he had perforce to change certain passages, as the places were too readily identifiable. The "wild and romantic" Hampstead scenery was also to feature in The Woman in White (1860). Collins felt that he did not know enough about the lower classes and groups with whom he did not ordinarily come into contact. It was typical of him that he should set about this methodically and in a way which would not be too arduous: he began travelling around London by omnibus. What he learned while with Antrobus and Co., Tea Importers, was to be reflected in his studies of commercial men, clerks and small shopkeepers. The years which he ostensibly occupied with reading law were not altogether wasted: some of his best characters are those of attorneys, some of his best scenes are court scenes; and legal twists, especially those connected with wills, legacies and marriage laws were to provide him with much interesting material.

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1. *ibid.*

He had already developed a love for drama and had spent many hours watching plays, hours which should often have been devoted to other pursuits. While on his youthful trips to Paris he must have watched French plays, for he developed an admiration for the French type of theatre which was to influence, in his leanings towards sensational writing especially, his technique both as a dramatist and as a novelist.

When we look for the literary figures who influenced Collins at the outset of his career, we find him eloquent on this point. Yates ^{1.} reports that Collins thought Addison "a neat but trivial writer", but that he considered Byron's Letters to be "the best English I know". Of Fielding and Smollett, Collins considered that they "were only read by scholars", but he thought that Goldsmith "had left an imperishable work in The Vicar of Wakefield".

He acknowledged Balzac, Scott, Dickens, Dumas, Hugo, Reade and Marryatt as his favourite novelists, ^{2.} and we are able to find traces of their influence even in his early work. In 1859 he was to write a most pathetic life history of Balzac for All the Year Round, ^{3.} and he was well acquainted with Lockhart's Life of Scott (1838) ^{4.} and Scott's many works. Antonina, Collins's first published novel, is an imitation of Scott and more particularly of Lytton. Traces of the influence of Fenimore Cooper are to be found as early as 1854: the

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1. Robinson K.: Wilkie Collins, p. 293, quoting from Edmund Yates, Celebrities at Home, Third Series. (1879).
2. Ashley R.: Wilkie Collins, p. 109.
3. Portrait of an Author, later included in Little Novels.
4. Your Money or Your Life, 17th Dec., 1881: In a note Collins says that this story is based upon what happened to a cousin of Scott's and gives Lockhart as his source.

character of Mat, in Hide and Seek, could easily have stepped out of the pages of The Deerslayer or The Last of the Mohicans. Later we are to find similar traces of Cooper in The Perils of Certain English Prisoners (1857).

Bulwer Lytton's Last Days of Pompeii was all the rage at this time and, with Antonina, Collins joined a group of minor writers who published similar novels at about the same time.¹ The similarities in choice of subject and treatment are striking. Collins acknowledges his indebtedness to Gibbon for his historical background by means of learned footnotes in the first edition of Antonina. These were all deleted from later editions. His praise of Gibbons's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is omitted from the prefaces of later editions.

In the art of mechanical story-telling, Collins is successor to Defoe: the plain statement of singular fact; the corroborative evidence; the attention to detail and the coherence of the narrative leading to an illusion of reality: these constitute the strength of both. In addition, Collins's Jezebels owe something to Roxana, and both Defoe and Collins were careful to make clear the probity of their purpose in portraying this type of woman.

Such were the ingredients which went to make up a writer who was to delight a host of readers, who was to anger critics, and exasperate those who were to attempt a study of the man and an assessment of his work.

(Part II.)

1. Harrison Ainsworth: Lancashire Witches (1851); G.P.R. James: The Fate (1851); Charles Macfarlane: Leonard Lyndsay (1850); W.G. Sims: Katherine Walton (1851) G.J. Whyte-Melville: Digby Grand (1853).