

**THE DEEPER REACH OF PEN:  
PORTRAITURE AND FICTION IN WILKIE  
COLLINS'S *BASIL: A STORY OF MODERN LIFE* (1852)**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with Wilkie Collins's *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852). It seeks to contextualise the work in the cultural moment of its composition, focussing in particular on the relationship between *Basil* and two strands of aesthetic theory that were beginning to be developed in the early 1850s: an aesthetic of portraiture that was opposed to the conventions of the Royal Academy, and an aesthetic of prose fiction that was similarly opposed to what Collins described as the 'conventionalities' of the novel. Chapter 1 is concerned with the manuscript of the first draft of *Basil*, and establishes that that draft was written between June and November 1851. Chapter 2 considers the extent to which the text engages with specific aesthetic and cultural issues that were to the fore in the summer of 1851, in particular Pre-Raphaelitism and the Great Exhibition; that leads to a discussion in chapter 3 of the way in which Basil's verbal portraits of certain characters imitate an aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture, intended to enable the viewer to effect a physiognomical reading of the character of the sitter, that was at the time being advocated both by Collins himself and by his friend Tom Taylor and put into practice, in different ways, by his close friends John Everett Millais and Edward Matthew Ward. But while Collins causes Basil to imitate that aesthetic of portraiture, he also undercuts the imitation by making Basil unable to understand the significance of what he sees and describes to the reader. Chapter 4 seeks to identify the inspiration for the manifesto for fiction that Collins sets out in the Letter of Dedication to Charles James Ward that serves as a preface to the novel; it is argued that it derives from George Henry Lewes's reviews of novels in *The Leader*, with which Collins was closely associated at the time that he was writing *Basil*. Collins not only adopts Lewes's aesthetic of 'reality' in fiction as his own but also ascribes it to Basil, who is figured as a writer whose literary ambition and career closely parallel Collins's. Whereas Basil's imitation of the aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture is undercut, therefore, his imitation of the literary aesthetic of 'reality' is not; rather, it is enhanced by Collins's identification of Basil with himself as a writer. It is argued that Collins was concerned not only to contrast Basil's imitations of the two aesthetics but also to highlight the greater possibilities for the representation of character that are available to the novelist than to the portrait painter, inasmuch as the former, unlike the latter, can deploy irony to expose the fallibility of their narrator. By way of brief coda, chapter 5 considers the way in which in *The Woman in White* (1860) Collins returned to, and seems significantly to have developed his thinking about, the subject of the representational capabilities of portraiture and fiction respectively.

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## INTRODUCTION

*'Basil is by no manner of means an impeccable work of imperishable art [...]. But [...] [it] has something of sustained though not elevated interest' – A. C. Swinburne<sup>1</sup>*

This interdisciplinary thesis is concerned with Wilkie Collins's *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (1852). Using methodologies of historical and critical analysis of text as well as of art and material culture, and building on a foundation of contemporary primary evidence rather than secondary commentary, it seeks to contextualise the work in the cultural moment of its composition, focussing in particular on the relationship between *Basil* and two strands of aesthetic theory that were beginning to be developed in the early 1850s: an aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture that was opposed to the conventions of the Royal Academy, and an aesthetic of 'reality' in prose fiction that was similarly opposed to what Collins described as the 'conventionalities' of the novel (vol. I, p. xi).<sup>2</sup> These emerging aesthetics are explored through the work of critics and artists who were closely connected by social and professional relationships with Collins at the time that he was writing *Basil*: Tom Taylor, John Everett Millais, Edward Matthew Ward, and George Henry Lewes.

*Basil* was Collins's second published novel, and the first set in the present day. His previous works were a biography of his father, William Collins R.A. (1848); *Antonina* (1850), a historical novel set in Rome around the time of its sacking by the Goths in 410 CE, heavily

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<sup>1</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Wilkie Collins', *The Fortnightly Review*, vol. 46, no. 275 (November 1 1889), pp. 589-99, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) (pp. 265-66).

<sup>2</sup> In-text references in this form are references to the text of the first published edition: W. Wilkie Collins, *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (3 vols) (London: Richard Bentley, 1852); that text was republished in one volume by James Blackwood in 1856. A revised one-volume edition of *Basil* (without the original subtitle), which is the basis of all subsequent editions of the text, appeared in 1862, published by Sampson Low; the most readily accessible version of the 1862 edition is in the Oxford World's Classics series, edited by Dorothy Goldman. Given that this thesis is principally concerned with the cultural context of the work at the time of its first publication, it has been thought appropriate to refer to the first, three-volume, edition throughout.

influenced by Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*; *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), an account of a walking tour in Cornwall illustrated by his companion, the artist Henry Brandling, and *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* (1851),<sup>3</sup> a Christmas story described by John Ruskin as 'a gross imitation of Dickens', albeit 'not ill written'.<sup>4</sup> By comparison with Collins's canonical works of the 1860s – *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866), and *The Moonstone* (1868) – *Basil* is relatively little known. It has certainly received nothing like the critical attention paid to those later texts. In the circumstances, it may assist the reader of what follows to give a brief outline of the plot.

Basil is the 23-year-old second son of an ancient and wealthy family. His father is characterised by obsessive pride in his lineage; his elder brother, Ralph, is a charming rake, currently living abroad with his mistress, and his younger sister, Clara, is a paragon of goodness and virtue. One summer's day Basil is travelling in an omnibus when a young girl gets in. From the moment he first sees the girl, Basil is irresistibly attracted to her; he falls in love before he has even seen the face concealed by her veil. When the girl and her companion leave the omnibus, Basil follows them to their home, North Villa, 'one of the newest of the new houses' in Hollyoake Square, 'a new square' in a half-built suburb (vol. I, p. 120). Later that day he returns; he is told by a tradesman's boy that the girl's father's name is Sherwin, and that he keeps a large linen-draper's shop in Oxford Street. Basil visits the shop, where he

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<sup>3</sup> Although the title page stated the date of publication to be 1852, the first edition of *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* was in fact published in late December 1851 (see Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 22 December 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, ed. William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law, Paul Lewis (4 vols) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), vol. 1, p. 55 ('With this I send the Leader Copy of the Christmas book')).

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, letter to James Ruskin, 5 May 1852: *Ruskin's Letters from Venice, 1851-1852*, ed. John Lewis Bradley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), letter 225, pp. 270-71 (p. 270). *The Spectator* wrote that 'To those who look only to externals, it may seem odd to say that *Mr. Wray's Cash-box* is a kind of imitation of Dickens,—persons, classes, incidents, and scene or locality, being all so different: nevertheless, such is really the case' ('Christmas Books—Mr Way's Cash-box: The Pathway of the Fawn', Supplement to *The Spectator*, vol. 25, no. 1227 (January 3 1852), pp. 4-5 (p. 4)).

learns that the girl's name is Margaret. That night, Basil has a dream in which he is caught between two women, one dark like Margaret, who approaches him from a wood on a plain, the other fair like Clara and dressed in white, who watches and beckons to him from a hilltop. The dark woman draws him along in her arms, 'until we entered the secret recesses that lay among the unfathomable depths of trees. And there, she encircled me in the folds of her dusky robe, and laid her hot cheek close to mine, and murmured a mysterious music in my ear' (vol. I, pp. 158-59). Less than a week after first seeing her, Basil calls on Mr Sherwin and asks to marry Margaret, although his own father's inevitable disapproval means that the matter must be kept secret. Mr Sherwin suggests that they marry immediately, to prevent Basil's father from breaking off any engagement, but that in view of Margaret's age – she is only seventeen – the marriage remain unconsummated for a year, during which time Basil is not to see her except in the presence of a third party. Basil agrees, and he and Margaret are married a week later.

Basil's year-long 'probation' passes apparently uneventfully, although 'certain accidents and events happened' on which he later looks back 'as so many friendly warnings which I fatally misunderstood, or fatally overlooked' (vol. II, pp. 3-4). He is introduced to Mr Sherwin's managing clerk, the enigmatic Robert Mannion, 'a complete walking mystery' (vol. II, p. 37) that Basil is unable to solve even when he has a long conversation with Mannion in the latter's apartment while sheltering from a storm. Not long after that, Basil goes to the country for a week to stay with his father and sister; on his return he finds Margaret and Mannion both changed, and claiming to be unwell. On the evening of the last day of his probation Basil goes to North Villa as usual, only to find that Margaret, escorted by Mannion, has gone out to a party at her aunt's house. Basil decides to go to the party himself in order to see Margaret home. As he approaches the house he sees Margaret and Mannion leaving, an hour

and a half before the due time for departure. They get into a cab, and Basil follows. Just as he is about to call out to them, their cab turns off ‘in a direction directly opposite to the direction which led to North Villa’ (vol. II, p. 141). Basil continues to follow, and sees Margaret and Mannion leave their cab and enter a hotel. He enters after them and demands that the waiter take him where he can hear their voices. He is shown into an empty room, where ‘I listened; and through the thin partition, I heard voices—*her* voice, and *his* voice. *I heard and I knew—*knew my degradation in all its infamy, knew my wrongs in all their nameless horror’ (vol. II, p. 146). Basil leaves the hotel and waits outside. When Mannion comes out, Basil attacks him, hurling him face downward onto the granite of a newly mended road. He is about to beat his adversary to death when he hears the door of the hotel open again. Leaving Mannion, Basil confronts Margaret, but she escapes from him. Basil wanders through the streets until he collapses, to be found by a policeman and brought home.

He is seriously ill for weeks, deliriously reliving the events of the previous year and seeing phantasmagoric visions of Margaret and Mannion. When he recovers, Basil learns from a newspaper that Mannion has survived his attack and is disfigured and half-blinded in hospital. Basil confesses the story of his marriage to his father, who tears out Basil’s page from his history of the family and banishes him from the house. As he leaves, Basil is handed a letter; it is from Mannion, who proceeds to reveal all in a tone of mingled self-justification and threat. When he first met Margaret, though she was then “‘just changing from childhood to girlhood’” (vol. III, p. 32), Mannion had resolved that “‘when the time comes, and I speak the word’”, she should “‘come to my side and of her own free will put her hand in mine, and follow me wherever I go: my wife, my mistress, my servant, which I choose’” (vol. III, pp. 33-34). Just when he was ready to speak that word, however, Mannion went away on business for Mr Sherwin; while he was away, he learned not only that Margaret had married

but that the man she had married was the son of the man whose evidence had led to his own father being hanged for forgery. On his return to London, Mannion proposed to Margaret (“not a pure-minded girl, not a maidenly girl” (vol. III, p. 55)) that she should be Basil’s wife but his mistress; that proposition was made good on the fatal night at the hotel. If not for Basil’s attack on him, “there [...] my retaliation might once have ended. It has, now, only begun. Remember the work of your own hands, that night, where the sharp granite lay over the road!” (vol. III, p. 66). Mannion ends his letter with the promise that “with the hour when I leave this hospital your day of triumph will be over, and your day of expiation will begin—never to end till the death of one of us” (vol. III, p. 67). “[Y]ou shall never get quit of me, never get quit of the wife who has dishonoured you. [...] My deformed face, and her fatal beauty [...] shall hunt you through the world” (vol. III, pp. 69-70).

Next day, Basil is visited by his brother Ralph, who has just returned from the Continent and heard from their sister what has happened. Basil and Ralph go to the hospital where Mannion is being treated, where they learn that Margaret has visited him. In the course of that visit Margaret contracted typhus from another patient, and the doctor treating her tells Basil that she is dying in delirium. Basil goes to her bedside, and hears her sexually explicit ravings about her seducer: “You make me feel on fire. You know I like you, because I *must* like you; because I can’t help it. *You* are a man; a strong, daring, conquering man: *he’s* a — —” (vol. III, p. 177); in a reversal of the scene in the hotel, he realises that Mannion is listening to them from an adjoining room. A few days later, Mannion confronts Basil as he stands by Margaret’s grave: “Do you know me for Robert Mannion? [...] Do you know the work of your own hands, now you see it?” (vol. III, p. 199). To protect his family from Mannion’s promised vengeance, Basil leaves London and takes refuge in Cornwall. There his main narrative ends; the rest of the story is told through his Journal and three Letters in

Conclusion.

The Journal opens as Basil finishes writing his story in a small fishing village on the southern coast of Cornwall, where he has lived for two months. He notices that the villagers have begun to shun him, and realises that Mannion has followed him and turned their minds against him. Basil abandons his cottage and sets out along the coast for Penzance. As he stands on the edge of an abyss that plunges down to the sea, Mannion again confronts him. Basil flees; Mannion follows, loses his balance on the slippery rocks while shaking his fist at Basil, and falls into the abyss. Basil makes his way to the next village, where he succumbs to fever, and the Journal peters out. The first two of the Letters in Conclusion record how an inhabitant of the village contacts Basil's family; the third is written by Basil 'nearly nine years later' (vol. III, p. 283), and serves as an epilogue to his story. Basil is now living quietly with his sister Clara on a small estate inherited from their mother. He was fully reconciled with his father, who has recently died; with his death, Basil feels able to publish his autobiography.

As will be apparent from this summary, the novel takes an abrupt turn at its halfway point, from a sentimental romance set in a middle-class suburb of London to a Gothic melodrama of sexual betrayal and revenge that reaches its climax on the wildest stretch of the Cornish coast.

Indeed, for Dorothy Sayers,

[I]n *Basil* two Collinses were inharmoniously at work together. One of them – the Collins who was arrested in his development – was trying to write a realistic tale about a love-affair; the other, the Collins who was eventually to achieve greatness, was trying clumsily to put together a melodramatic plot about vengeance and horror. [...] The two elements are yoked but not mated together [...].<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study*, ed. E. R. Gregory (Toledo: The Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries, 1977), p. 87.

Be that as it may, a significant strand of the relatively exiguous scholarship that has sought to locate *Basil* in its cultural context has been concerned with the way it transposes the tropes of the Gothic fiction of an earlier era to a recognisably contemporary setting. This is an aspect of the novel that was recognised by its first reviewers: *The Athenæum* described *Basil* as ‘almost revolting from its domestic horrors’,<sup>6</sup> while *Bentley’s Miscellany* noted that

There is a startling antagonism between the intensity of the passion, the violent spasmodic action of the piece, and its smooth, common-place environments. The scenery, the *dramatis personæ*, the costumery, are all of the most familiar every-day type, belonging to an advanced stage of civilization; but there is something rude and barbarous, almost Titanic, about the incidents; they belong to a different state of society[.]<sup>7</sup>

and subsequent critics have observed that its combination of domestic realism and Gothic themes and motifs gives *Basil* a good claim to be regarded as a predecessor of the ‘sensation’ fiction for which Collins was to become famous in the 1860s.<sup>8</sup> The full extent of Collins’s indebtedness to Gothic, and in particular ‘female’ Gothic, fiction has been demonstrated by Tamar Heller and others,<sup>9</sup> and Heller, who reads *Basil* as an exploration of the anxieties of a male writer working in a genre of popular fiction usually associated with female writers and readers, rightly regards Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – a work Collins knew so well at the age of eighteen that he was able to recite its ‘most terrible portions’ to family and friends<sup>10</sup> –

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<sup>6</sup> [Daniel Owen Maddyn], ‘*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1310 (December 4 1852), pp. 1322-23; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> [John William Kaye], “‘Esmond’ and ‘Basil’”, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, vol. 32 (December 1852), pp. 576-86; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> Anne-Marie Beller, for example – who notes that the word ‘sensation’ is obsessively repeated throughout the opening chapters of *Basil* – writes that it was the first novel in which Collins ‘place[d] a sensational tale of crime, treachery and emotional turmoil into a contemporary middle-class setting, leading more than one modern critic to posit [it] as a credible prototype for sensation fiction or even as the first true sensation novel’ (Anne-Marie Beller, ‘Sensation fiction in the 1850s’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Andrew Mangham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 7-20 (p. 10)).

<sup>9</sup> As well as the works by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, and others cited below, see Keith Brown Reierstad, ‘The Demon in the House; or, The Domestication of Gothic in the Novels of Wilkie Collins’, PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1976, pp. 162-99, who gives a particularly full account of the Gothic themes and devices in *Basil*.

<sup>10</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to William Collins, R.A., 24 August 1842: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ed. William Baker and William M. Clarke (2 vols) (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 13-14. *Frankenstein* is a strong influence on what is at present Collins’s earliest known work of fiction, a short story titled ‘Volpurno –

as the Gothic predecessor that he ‘most obviously revises’.<sup>11</sup> The respects in which *Basil* is, in Mariaconcetta Costantini’s phrase, ‘modelled on a Shelleyan hypotext’<sup>12</sup> are readily discernible, not only in specific verbal reminiscence (Mannion’s injunction to Basil to “Remember the work of your own hands, that night”, like his question “Do you know the work of your own hands, now you see it?”, echoes the words of Shelley’s creature, who describes himself to Frankenstein as ‘the work of your hands’ or ‘the work of your own hands’),<sup>13</sup> but also at the levels of plot (Mannion’s implacable pursuit of Basil to the wilds of Cornwall is reminiscent of Frankenstein’s pursuit of the creature though the remote places of the earth, to the extent that it has been described as ‘a near parodic reversal’ of Shelley’s story),<sup>14</sup> of narrative form (both stories are told in a series of first-person voices, some of

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or the Student’, published in May 1843: see Daniel Hack, ‘Volpurno – or the Student: A forgotten tale of madness by Wilkie Collins’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5518 (January 2 2009), pp. 14-15 (p. 14).

<sup>11</sup> Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Mariaconcetta Costantini, “I hate him. No, I don’t... I hate myself”: Wilkie Collins and the Anatomy of Hatred’, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2009), pp. 582-92 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.147>> (para. 10).

<sup>13</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. M. K. Joseph (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 101; 145.

<sup>14</sup> Helena Ifill, *Creating character: Theories of nature and nurture in Victorian sensation fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 34. Mannion’s pursuit of Basil is also reminiscent of Ferdinando Falkland’s pursuit of the eponymous narrator of *Caleb Williams* by Shelley’s father William Godwin, as was observed by more than one contemporary critic of *Basil*: the reviewer in *The Globe* wrote that ‘We closed the last volume with sensations akin to those felt on every re-perusal of old Godwin’s undying creation. “Caleb Williams,” to which, in many features, Basil bears a striking affinity’ (‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *The Globe*, no. 16965 (November 25 1852), p. 1), *Bentley’s Miscellany* considered that ‘The intense everywhere predominates. It is of the Godwin school of fiction’ ([John William Kaye], “Esmond” and “Basil”, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, vol. 32 (December 1852), pp. 576-86; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 35), and *The Weekly Dispatch* declared that ‘The story has been described as cast in Godwin’s best style, and so it is’ (‘Basil: a Story of Modern Life’, *The Weekly Dispatch*, no. 2664 (December 19 1852), p. 6). More recent opinion is divided as to the extent to which Collins may have been influenced by Godwin: Robert Ashley considers that *Basil* has ‘a striking resemblance to Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* in theme, plot, tone, and technique’ (Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Arthur Barker, 1952), p. 35), Nicholas Rance that it is ‘pervasively indebted to *Caleb Williams*’ (Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 52), and Maurizio Ascari that it ‘can be considered in many respects as a “rewriting” of *Caleb Williams*’ (Maurizio Ascari, ‘The rise of probability, detection and the “unity of design” between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries’, in *The Case and the Canon: Anomalies, discontinuities, metaphors between science and literature*, ed. Alessandra Calanchi, Gastone Castellani, Gabriella Morisco, Giorgio Turchetti (Goettingen: V and R unipress, 2011) pp. 113-23 (p. 120)), whereas R. V. Andrew finds *Caleb Williams* ‘altogether different in structure, mood, approach, theme, treatment and ending. [...] It seems to me that this novel contributed nothing to *Basil*’ (R. V. Andrew, *Wilkie Collins. A Critical Survey of His Prose Fiction with a Bibliography* (DLitt thesis, Potchefstroom University for C.H.E., 1959) (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1979), pp. 33-34).

which speak through letters), and of structure (Mannion's lengthy letter of explanation at the beginning of volume III of *Basil* fulfils a similar function,<sup>15</sup> at a similar point in the story, to the even lengthier narrative of the creature that occupies chapters XI-XVI of *Frankenstein*).<sup>16</sup> What is more, as Tamara Wagner observes, *Basil*'s setting in the 'developing literary space' of the rapidly expanding new suburbs of mid-nineteenth-century London represents Collins's first venture into 'suburban Gothic', which 'transforms suburbs into sensational topographies' and thereby became a genre, distinct from urban or domestic Gothic, that was to play a crucial part in the sensation novel's development.<sup>17</sup>

Collins's indebtedness to Gothic fiction is also explored by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, whose work demonstrates the way in which *Basil* presents Gothic themes through the prism of contemporary scientific and medical discourse, particularly discourses of physiology and psychology.<sup>18</sup> Talairach-Vielmas thereby connects the study of suburban Gothic to the other principal strand of scholarly discussion of *Basil*, a strand which originates in Jenny Bourne Taylor's seminal study of Collins's work in the context of contemporary psychology, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*. Taylor's reading of *Basil* – from which her study takes its title (Basil sees in Mrs Sherwin's face 'one of those ghastly heart-tragedies [...] which are not to be written, but which are acted and re-acted, scene by scene and year by year, in the secret theatre of home' (vol. I, p. 236)) – as a 'bizarre, intense exploitation and exploration of the

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<sup>15</sup> In the words of Jenny Bourne Taylor, Mannion's letter, like the narrative of the creature, 'sets up an alternative moral and social framework which challenges the one within which it is framed by offering an inverted replication of it' (Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 92-93).

<sup>16</sup> Laurence Talairach-Vielmas sees further strong connections between *Basil* and *Frankenstein* in '[t]he unconsummated marriage, the hero's unrestrained passion, which disfigures Mannion and makes a monster of him, [...] and the emphasis on dreams, ravings, deliriums which punctuate the plot' (Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 23).

<sup>17</sup> Tamara S. Wagner, 'Sensationalizing Victorian Suburbia: Wilkie Collins's *Basil*', in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 200-11 (p. 200).

<sup>18</sup> See Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic*, pp. 18-39.

psychological codes that govern the makeup and breakdown of social identity’, drawing on and merging ‘notions of constructed and inherited identities – discourses of the self which [...] still had essentially malleable ideological connotations in the 1850s’, has provided an invaluable starting point for subsequent scholarship, with her analysis of Basil himself as ‘a melancholic hovering on the brink of monomania – a “hypochondriac” in both senses of the term as nervous sensibility merges into the morbid interpretation of imaginary symptoms’ proving to be particularly fruitful.<sup>19</sup> Helena Ifill, for example, notes that not only does Basil display signs of monomania but Mannion is explicitly diagnosed with the condition – the doctor treating him in hospital observes that ‘his mania [is] connected with some fixed idea which evidently never leaves him day or night’ (vol. III, p. 148) – and writes that ‘Collins represents these two characters in accordance with early-nineteenth-century theories of insanity that proposed that “the passions” were at the basis of mental breakdown.’<sup>20</sup> (In her recent study of male mental illness in Victorian Britain, Amy Milne-Smith locates Collins’s depictions of Basil and Mannion, both of whom suffer mental breakdowns that are seen by others as madness – “MAD!”—that word, as I heard it, rang after me, like a voice of judgment’ (vol. II, p. 159) – in a ‘[p]opular culture [that] was littered with representations of men living lives on the brink of collapse’.)<sup>21</sup> Others, including Matthew Sweet, Tamara Wagner, and John Kucich, have developed Taylor’s insights by considering *Basil* in relation to explorations by Collins and other novelists of the nature of masculinity: Sweet writes that Basil’s hysteria marks him as the first in a line of heroes constructed by Collins each one of whom ‘is a complex study of various kinds of debilitated masculinity, men unable to operate

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, pp. 93; 74.

<sup>20</sup> Ifill, *Creating character*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Milne-Smith, *Out of his mind: Masculinity and mental illness in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), p. 238.

completely effectively in narratives demanding heroic action’;<sup>22</sup> Wagner argues that the ‘nervous, physically delicate hero’ of *Basil* anticipates a shift away from Victorian notions of muscular masculinity towards a sensitive manliness that is central in Collins’s novels of the 1870s and 1880s, and looks both forward to ‘the new fin de siècle antihero’ and back to ‘the sentimental heroes of the late-eighteenth-century novel of [...] sensibility’;<sup>23</sup> while Kucich sees Basil, who in his reading represents ‘the dangerous feminisation of male identity that occurs when melancholia is divorced from narcissistic power’;<sup>24</sup> as the earliest portrayal in fiction of a type of male melancholic that was much discussed in the 1850s and 1860s.

Although Taylor and those who have built on her work consider many of the contemporary ideas of identity and consciousness that can be seen to underlie the text, not least in Collins’s accounts of Basil’s dream and his delirious visions while ill,<sup>25</sup> there is one aspect of mid-nineteenth-century psychological discourse that has not been the subject of scholarly discussion. A study of mesmerism in the context of *Basil*, which was written at a time when ‘The attention of the public to mesmerism, which was recently on the wane, has been suddenly revived’;<sup>26</sup> would be outside the scope of the present thesis, but the topic undoubtedly presents fertile ground for further investigation. That Collins was keenly interested in mesmerism, or magnetism, at the time that he was writing his novel is well established. In early 1852 he published in *The Leader* a series of accounts of mesmeric

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew Sweet, ‘Psychosis and the Sensation Hero: Masculinity, Medicine and Madness in Victorian Sensation Fiction’, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2001, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup> Tamara S. Wagner, ‘“Overpowering Vitality”: Nostalgia and Men of Sensibility in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 4 (December 2002), pp. 471-500 (pp. 482; 471).

<sup>24</sup> John Kucich, ‘Collins and Victorian masculinity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 125-38 (p. 127).

<sup>25</sup> See Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, pp. 84-91; Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 110-26; Valerie Pedlar, ‘*The Most Dreadful Visitation*’: *Male Madness in Victorian Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 53-69.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Electro-Biology’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (July 1851), pp. 312-28 (p. 312); the works reviewed included one titled *The Mesmeric Mania of 1851*.

seances written from the point of view of ‘the man who believes in the magnetic influence’<sup>27</sup> and published in the belief that ‘they will furnish specimens of evidence, which the opponents of Animal Magnetism will find it much easier contemptuously to reject than fairly to confute’,<sup>28</sup> the last of which concluded with the resounding words

[T]he future of Animal Magnetism [...] seems to me to be already assured. The science has, of late years, gained a vast hold on the convictions of men of intellect and men of honour in all quarters. As such persons continue to study it, year by year, more closely, and to extract from it more clearly the practical uses to which it may assuredly be directed for the benefit of humanity, so will the circle of believers, whose belief is worth gaining, inevitably widen and widen; and so will the masses [...] be drawn into that circle after them[.]<sup>29</sup>

and although they have not been previously remarked, allusions to mesmerism abound in the text. In particular, Mannion (whose ‘extraordinary regularity of feature’ and ‘hard, chill grey eyes’ that ‘gave you no help in trying to study him’ (vol. II, pp. 25; 32; 27) give him a marked physical resemblance to Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*, who boasts of his ‘luminous experience of the more subtle resources which medical and magnetic science have placed at the disposal of mankind’ and seeks to practise his “quack remedies (mesmerism included)” on Marian Halcombe, and is likewise possessed of ‘magnificent regularity’ of features and ‘unfathomable grey eyes’)<sup>30</sup> speaks repeatedly in his letter to Basil of how he acquired and exercised ‘influence’ over Margaret: “What was the secret of my influence over her?” (vol. III, p. 8); “The more I strengthened my sources of influence over Margaret, the more pleased [her father] was” (vol. III, p. 35); “I left England [...] confident that my short absence would not weaken the result of years of steady influence over Margaret” (vol.

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<sup>27</sup> W. W[ilkie] C[ollins], ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter II—To G. H. Lewes’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 99 (February 14 1852), pp. 160-61 (p. 161).

<sup>28</sup> W. W[ilkie] C[ollins], ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter I—To G. H. Lewes’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 95 (January 17 1852), pp. 63-64 (p. 63).

<sup>29</sup> W. W[ilkie] C[ollins], ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter VI—To G. H. Lewes’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 103 (March 13 1852), pp. 256-57 (p. 257).

<sup>30</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 344; 373; 221.

III, p. 45); “‘I saw that with my return, my old influence over her was coming back’” (vol. III, pp. 49-50); “‘My first renewal of my old influence over her [...] [was] outwardly shadowed forth in her’”(vol. III, p. 62). Basil in turn comes under the influence of Margaret – ‘an influence that I cannot describe—an influence which I had never experienced in my life before, which I shall never experience again’ (vol. I, p. 114) – at the moment when he touches her arm when helping her into the omnibus; he feels the prolonged sense of the touch ‘thrilling through me—thrilling in every nerve, in every pulsation of my fast-throbbing heart. [...] Had I the same influence over her? Or was it I that received, and she that conferred, only?’ (vol. I, pp. 114-15). This is the language of mesmerism. ‘Influence’ was the term generally used to describe what Collins called ‘the limitless power of the will of the [magnetizer] over the will of the [person magnetized]’:<sup>31</sup> the acknowledged mesmerist Count Fosco, for example, exercises ‘influence’ over Marian Halcombe’s ‘thoughts and feelings’,<sup>32</sup> the Indian jugglers’ boy in *The Moonstone* “‘is unquestionably subject to the mesmeric influence—and, under that influence, he has no doubt reflected what was already in the mind of the person influencing him’”,<sup>33</sup> and the narrator of *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1880) feels the ‘influence’ of Madame Fontaine ‘subject the action of my will more and more completely to the action of hers’; ‘How that influence was exerted—whether it was through her eyes, or through her manner, or [...] through some “magnetic emanation” from her, which invisibly overpowered me—is more than I can possibly say.’<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it is clear that not only is Mannion’s influence over Margaret – whose character he summarises in terms (deceitful, vain, “‘showy’” (vol. III, p. 42)) that are strikingly similar to the observation of ‘most

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<sup>31</sup> Collins, ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter II’, p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Francis O’Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 275-76.

<sup>34</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel’s Daughter*, ed. Jason David Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 45.

mesmerists, that magnetic somnambulists are ever deceptive, vain, and fond of effect'<sup>35</sup> – mesmeric in nature, but so too is Margaret's over Basil. Basil's account of the sensation he feels when he touches Margaret's arm is similar to other descriptions by Collins of the effect of taking the hand of a mesmerised subject, both in his journalism ('I felt the magnetic influence communicating itself from her to me. The sensation was precisely like that produced by a mild shock from a galvanic battery')<sup>36</sup> and in his fiction ('As they touched each other, he was conscious of a faintly-titillating sensation in his own hand—a sensation which oddly reminded him of bygone experiments with an electrical machine, in the days when he was a boy at school!'),<sup>37</sup> and that Margaret's influence is mesmeric is further indicated by the fact that at least one contemporary novelist made express reference to mesmerism when describing – in terms that are not dissimilar to the 'phrases which must read like meaningless rhapsody' in which Basil describes 'the mysterious attraction' which drew him to Margaret, 'heart and soul, the moment she appeared before my eyes' (vol. I, p. 115) – the experience of falling in love at first sight:

Is it not passing strange to meet, whether in a crowd or in some lone spot, a being with certain limbs and organs, a being like ourselves corruptible, with the seed of death implanted in her, and immediately to feel that our life is bound up in hers, to turn away but never to forget, through space and eternity, to see the same glance, to recall the very inflection of the voice, and if we have pressed her arm to feel all the blood gush towards the heart as by an electric shock? Is it not wonderful this sweet sympathy? and for those who have felt what a subtle essence love is, can we be surprised if such give credit to the wondrous tales of magnetic influence?<sup>38</sup>

What is more, the exercise of mesmeric influence was in the minds of many associated with

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<sup>35</sup> John Forbes, *Mesmerism True – Mesmerism False: A Critical Examination of the Facts, Claims, and Pretensions of Animal Magnetism* (London: John Churchill, 1845), p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> W. W[ilkie] C[ollins], 'Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter IV—To G. H. Lewes', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 101 (February 28 1852), pp. 207-208 (p. 208).

<sup>37</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'Percy and the Prophet', *All the Year Round*, Extra Summer Number, July 2 1877, pp. 1-30, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Julian Thompson (London: Robinson, 1995) (p. 584).

<sup>38</sup> [Alexander Baillie-Cochrane], *Lucille Belmont. A Novel* (3 vols) (London: Henry Colburn, 1849), vol. I, pp. 192-93.

the kind of sexual impropriety that is central to the plot of *Basil*, whether on the part of the mesmeriser – pamphleteers warned that ‘Wielded by a villain, the power [...] obtained over a defenceless victim may be wrested to the most diabolical purposes. It *has been* so wrested’,<sup>39</sup> leading articles in *The Lancet* listed among the ‘melancholy effect[s]’ of mesmerism that it ‘frequently lead[s] to a loss of virtue’<sup>40</sup> and denounced the ‘infamous purposes’ for which it was pursued, asking ‘What father of a family [...] would admit even the shadow of a mesmeriser within his threshold? Who would expose his wife, or his sister, his daughter, or his orphan ward, to the contact of an animal magnetiser?’<sup>41</sup> and novelists wrote luridly of ‘the dreadful abuses’ that might follow from ‘the extraordinary moral ascendancy obtained by the magnetizer over the magnetized,—an ascendancy which, in the hands of a corrupt and unprincipled person, may be, and has been, turned to the most dishonourable purposes’<sup>42</sup> – or the mesmerised: the eminent physician Francis Hawkins pronounced in 1848 that ‘the IMPOSTORS, called MESMERISTS, are [...] the especial FAVOURITES of those, both male and female, in whom the SEXUAL PASSIONS BURN STRONGLY, either in secret or notoriously’,<sup>43</sup> and that characterisation is borne out by an observer’s account of the conduct of a patient put into a trance by John Elliotson, the best-known mesmeric practitioner of the day and the principal target of Hawkins’s attack:

Splendidly now she rolled her eyes about; in a fine frenzy certainly, but we think not of poetry. In the course of our professional career we have once, and once only, seen a well-established case of nymphomania; and Miss Oky certainly knows how to imitate

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<sup>39</sup> A Medical Practitioner, *Quacks and Quackery. A Remonstrance against the Sanction given by the Government, the Press, and the Public, to the System of Imposture and Fraud practised on the Ignorant and Credulous in the Quackeries of the day; with Remarks on Homœopathy, Hydropathy, Mesmerism, Mesmero-Phrenology, &c.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1844), p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Virtues of Animal Magnetism’, *The Lancet*, vol. [31], no. 797 (December 8 1838), pp. 413-14 (p. 413).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Animal Magnetism’, *The Lancet*, vol. [31], no. 798 (December 15 1838), pp. 450-51 (p. 450).

<sup>42</sup> Isabella F. Romer, *Sturmer; A Tale of Mesmerism. To which are added Other Sketches from Life* (3 vols) (London: Richard Bentley, 1841), vol. I, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> John Elliotson, ‘The London College of Physicians and Mesmerists’, *The Zoist*, vol. 6, no. 24 (January 1849), pp. 399-405 (p. 404), translating Francis Hawkins, *Oratio ex Harveii instituto in ædibus Collegii Regalis Medicorum habita die Junii XXIV; MDCCCXLVIII* (London: John Churchill, 1848), p. 25 (‘De genera hoc, præstigiatores, quos vocant, *Mesmerici*, ni fallor, iis præcipue arident, quos, utriusque sexus, Mater sæva Cupidinum aut cæcis urit ignibus, aut palam exagitat’).

the symptoms of that malady. We cannot conceive what the future Mrs. Elliotson would have said had she witnessed the scene that followed. With one jump the chaste Oky cleared all the distance between the chair and the Doctor, threw her dear magnetised arms around his neck and kissed him. O, how she did kiss him! “Oh, oh, oh! my dear, dear Doctor Elliotson,” she cried with an energetic but soft rapture, her voice growing fainter with every “oh” and with every “dear.”<sup>44</sup>

The text contains other references to medical and scientific issues of the period. For example, the doctor John Bernard’s exposition of the pathology of typhus clearly alludes to topical controversy, no doubt present to Collins’s mind following the cholera epidemic of 1848-49, as to whether the means of transmission of epidemic disease was ‘miasm’, as was maintained by the General Board of Health,<sup>45</sup> or contagion, as a significant body of medical opinion believed,<sup>46</sup> including, it appears, Bernard himself:

After talking together in whispers for a few moments, they rejoined me. Mr. Bernard was explaining the different theories of infection to Ralph.

“My notion,” he said, “is, that infection is taken through the lungs: one breath inhaled from the infected atmosphere hanging immediately around the diseased person, and generally extending about a foot from him, being enough to communicate his malady to the breather—provided there exists, at the time, in the individual exposed to catch the malady, a constitutional predisposition to infection” (vol. III, pp. 149-50).

This thesis, however, is concerned to locate *Basil* in the context, not of contemporary psychology or physiology, but of contemporary aesthetics. With the exception of Sundeep Bisla, who argues that *Basil* as a whole is a self-reflexive exploration of the changing status

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Another Mesmeric Mountebank’, *The Satirist*, March 18 1838, p. 83.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, General Board of Health, *Report on Quarantine* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1849), p. 20 (epidemic diseases ‘are transmitted not by infected persons, but by an infected atmosphere’); *Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera of 1848 & 1849* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1850), pp. 32 (‘In all cases where the facts have been carefully observed [...], [the disease] has appeared to attack and spread epidemically, and not by the contact of the sick with the healthy’); 36 (cholera ‘is propagated not by the contact of one infected person with another, but by a general influence’); 146 (cholera ‘is not in the common acceptance of the term contagious’).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, George Todd, ‘A Series of Papers on the Causes and Nature of Continued Fever. (Continued)’, *The Lancet*, vol. [53], no. 1330 (February 24 1849), pp. 200-204 (p. 201) (‘The medical practitioners of the United Kingdom are nearly unanimous in attributing continued fever to contagion’); *The Lancet*, vol. [54], no. 1352 (July 28 1849), pp. 97-98 (p. 97) (the Board of Health seeks ‘to prove the omnipotence of stench to produce cholera, plague, or any other epidemic [...]. Such doctrines will excite the laughter of all well-educated medical men’).

of the author from inspired artist to toiling labourer, and that Basil's dream in particular offers an insight into Collins's attitude to the debates on the extension of literary copyright that took place in the House of Commons between 1837 and 1842,<sup>47</sup> no previous scholar has sought to relate *Basil* to the aesthetic and cultural issues of its time. Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan suggest that the novel should be read in the context of the attempt by artists of the period, including Collins's friends Millais, William Holman Hunt, William Powell Frith, and Augustus Egg, 'to develop an original form for the representation of contemporary experience'.<sup>48</sup> But that is the most tenuous of associations: Dolin and Dougan do not seek to demonstrate any connection between *Basil*, published in 1852, and any painting earlier than Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, exhibited in 1854, and it could surely be argued that many other novelists – not only Charles Dickens, who also had numerous artist friends, but also the likes of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley – were equally concerned to represent 'contemporary experience' in their work.

Although the relationship between *Basil* and contemporary aesthetics of portraiture – the topic of chapter 3 below – has not been the subject of previous research, it is well known that Collins was keenly interested in painting; as he wrote in 1859, when he claimed not to have missed the opening of the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy 'for something like a score of years past', 'My admiration for modern Art almost amounts to fanaticism'.<sup>49</sup> He was the elder son of a respected and successful Royal Academician, William Collins – himself the son of a picture dealer and author of a memoir of George Morland – and (on his mother's

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<sup>47</sup> See Sundeep Bisla, *Wilkie Collins and Copyright: Artistic Ownership in the Age of the Borderless Word* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), pp. 57-109.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan, 'Fatal Newness: *Basil*, Art and the Origins of Sensation Fiction', in *Reality's Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), pp. 1-33 (p. 5).

<sup>49</sup> [Wilkie Collins], 'The Royal Academy in Bed', *All The Year Round*, no. 5 (May 28 1859), pp. 105-109 (p. 105).

side) the nephew of the portrait painter Margaret Sarah Carpenter, described by W. P. Frith as ‘perhaps the most eminent lady artist that this country has produced’;<sup>50</sup> his younger brother Charles Allston Collins was trained at the Royal Academy Schools and a regular exhibitor at the Academy between 1847 and 1854. Collins’s lifelong friend Holman Hunt said of him that ‘In youth he had thought of being a painter, but had gradually drifted into literature’,<sup>51</sup> and in 1849 Collins wrote to an American correspondent that ‘Although I do not follow my father’s profession, (being a student of Lincoln’s Inn; and only painting in leisure moments, in humble amateur-fashion, for my own amusement) I live very much in the society of artists’.<sup>52</sup> That same year, he exhibited a picture titled *The Smuggler’s Refuge* at the Royal Academy,<sup>53</sup> and although he appears thereafter to have given up painting, his knowledgeable interest in

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<sup>50</sup> W. P. Frith, *Further Reminiscences* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1888), p. 419.

<sup>51</sup> W. Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (2 vols) (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), vol. I, p. 302. Collins’s entry in *The Dictionary of National Biography* stated that after his father’s death in 1847, he ‘at first cherished the idea of supporting himself and his mother by following in his father’s footsteps’ (Thomas Seccombe, ‘Collins, William Wilkie’, in *Dictionary of National Biography. Supplement* (3 vols) (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1901), vol. II, pp. 46-49 (p. 47)).

<sup>52</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to R. H. Dana, 12 January 1849: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 53-55 (p. 53).

<sup>53</sup> Collins seems to have had no exaggerated opinion of the merits of his ‘freely painted’ picture (‘Royal Academy.—[Second Notice]’, *The Observer*, May 21 1849, p. 6), of which one reviewer said that ‘There is something of the father in the treatment and execution of this subject. The very title is somewhat similar’ (‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, 1849’, Supplement to *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 14, nos. 372-373 (May 26 1849), pp. 345-60 (p. 346)) and another that ‘I have only to remark that it is a pity R.A.’s sons will think after the style of their father’ (‘The London Exhibitions of 1849’, *The Leicestershire Mercury*, vol. 14, no. 672 (May 19 1849), p. 2). He caricatured himself in a short story written in early 1851 as

Mr. Scumble, an amateur artist of signal ability, whose name the public cannot fail to recognise, when it is stated that he was the painter of that celebrated picture, entitled, “Landscape—sunset,” which hung in the last Academy Exhibition but one, at the top of the Miniature Room, near the corner, on the left hand side as you go in

(W. Wilkie Collins, ‘A Pictorial Tour to St. George Bosherville’, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, vol. 29 (May 1851), pp. 493-508 (p. 493)), and the same tone of self-mockery can be heard in Holman Hunt’s account of how in later life, ‘If he saw your eyes wandering’ to *The Smuggler’s Refuge*, ‘he would burst out’:

“Ah! you might well admire that masterpiece; it was done by that great painter Wilkie Collins, and it put him so completely at the head of landscape painters that he determined to retire from the profession in compassion for the rest. The Royal Academy were so affected by its supreme excellence and its capacity to teach, that they carefully avoided putting it where taller people in front might obscure the view, but instead placed it high up, that all the world could without difficulty survey it. Admire, I beg you, sir, the way in which those colours stand; no cracking in that *chef-d’œuvre* and no tones ever fail. Admire the brilliancy of that lake reflecting the azure sky; well, sir, the painter of that picture has no petty jealousies, that unrivalled tone was compounded simply with Prussian blue and flake white, it was put on you say by a master hand, yes but it will show what simple materials in such a hand will achieve. I wish all masterpieces had defied time so triumphantly”

(Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. II, pp. 186-87).

the subject is reflected not only in the series of critical commentaries on art exhibitions and galleries that he wrote for *Bentley's Miscellany* in the summer of 1851 (see chapter 2 below) but also, for example, in Holman Hunt's account of his authoritative 'knowledge of the interests of art for more than one past generation' when talking of 'painters like Romney, Constable, Turner, and Leslie' at dinner in the winter of that year,<sup>54</sup> or in the explanation given by Charles Dickens, holidaying in Italy with Collins and Augustus Egg in 1853, as to why he refused to 'go into any Gallery with them':

To hear Collins learnedly holding forth to Egg (who has as little of that gammon as an artist *can* have) about reds, and greens, and things "coming well" with other things, and lines being wrong, and lines being right, is far beyond the bounds of all caricature. I shall never forget it.<sup>55</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that Collins's early writing is notable for its pictorial language.

His memoir of his father contains numerous ekphrastic descriptions of the latter's pictures. In *Fishermen Coming Ashore Before Sunrise*, for example,

[T]he left corner of the sky is tinged by a mild, dawning light, which rises over a bank of misty vapour, and touches the wild, sharp edges of a large cloud, stretching across the heaven towards the light. Above this, still lingers the deep, purple, transparent atmosphere of the departing night, studded, in one or two places with the glimmer of a fading star. Beneath, the fresh, buoyant sea, dances onward to the foreground, garnished here and there fantastically with the rising light. In front, a single fishing-boat—(whose large sail, flapping lazily against the mast, rises grandly against the lighter part of the sky)—is stranded in shallow water. Around, and on it, stand the burly fishermen, hauling in their nets over the wet sand. In the distance is seen a town, faintly discernible on the cliffs that rise on the right hand of the picture; while, on the horizon, appears the sail of another boat, approaching the beach. The tone of colour in this elaborate work is dark, yet transparent—representing a sort of brightening obscurity, and suggests at every point the mysterious morning stillness which reigns over the scene.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, pp. 310-11.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Dickens, letter to Mrs Charles Dickens, 21 November 1853: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (12 vols) (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), vol. 7 (ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Angus Easson) (1993), pp. 203-206 (p. 204). Dickens was more generous in his later observation that Collins 'has a good eye for pictures' (Charles Dickens, letter to John Forster, March 1856: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 8 (ed. Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson) (1995), pp. 65-66 (p. 66)).

<sup>56</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A. With Selections from His Journals and Correspondence* (2 vols) (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848), vol. I, pp. 106-107.

A very similar mode of description is characteristic of Collins's other early non-fiction, as in the portrayal in *Rambles Beyond Railways* of Plymouth Sound at evening:

In front of us, the last glories of day still lingered in the west. Here, the sky was yet bright and warm to look on, though the sun had gone down and, even now, the evening star was plainly visible. In this part of the landscape, the wooded hills rose dark and grand against their transparent background of light. Where the topmost trees grew thinnest, long strips of rosy sky appeared through their interstices; the water beyond us was tinged in one place with all the colours of the prism, in another with the palest and coldest blue—even the wet mud-banks, left by the retiring tide, still glittered with silvery brightness in the waning light. While, adding solemnity and mystery to all beside, the great hulks, painted pale yellow and anchored close in against the black trees, lay before us still and solitary, touched alike by the earliest moonbeams of night and the last sunlight of day.

*Rambles Beyond Railways* also relies on explicitly visual allusion in aid of verbal representation, as in

Here and there, an open door showed us a Rembrandt scene—a glowing red fire brilliantly illuminating the face of a woman cooking at it, or the form of ragged children asleep on the hearth; and leaving all beside—figures, furniture, and rough rafted ceiling—steeped in grand and gloomy shadow[.]

or 'Light, shade, and colour, were all before us, arranged in the grandest combinations, and expressed by the simplest forms. If Michael Angelo had painted landscape, he might have represented such a scene as we now beheld',<sup>57</sup> and Collins deployed the same stylistic techniques in 'Magnetic Evenings at Home', the accounts of mesmeric seances that he wrote in early 1852:

At the time when the new patient submitted himself to the magnetizer, the scene was one of the most picturesque I ever remember to have witnessed. It was now evening—a still, cold, clear winter evening. Dim shadows were gathering over the room; contrasted on one side by the ruddy firelight, on the other by the last rays of the setting sun, floating through the window. The positions of the spectators, as they anxiously watched the progress of the new experiment; the strange, wild contrasts of light and shade falling on every figure; the beauty and variety of the attitudes into which the children and the young girls accidentally fell, as they sat, reclined, or stood together; the natural harmony and grace in the formation of the different groups, made the room a perfect school for painters, a treasury of beautiful compositions, waiting to enrich with new material the resources of Art. Beyond the spectators, appeared the figures of the magnetizer and the patient, placed apart, just before the window, darkly

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<sup>57</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Rambles Beyond Railways; or, Notes in Cornwall Taken A-Foot* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), pp. 11-12; 18; 43.

and grandly relieved in their still positions by the mysterious evening light; while, without, the background to the whole scene was formed by the twining, weird shapes of leafless trees; the wave of the deep blue hills beyond; and the blood-red sun above, just glowing its last under a canopy of towering purple clouds. Rembrandt alone could have painted such a picture as the drawing-room at the parsonage-house presented at this moment.<sup>58</sup>

Such elaborate description of the picturesque is also a hallmark of Collins's very earliest fiction. Even in his first attempt at a novel, *Ioláni* (written in about 1844 but only published more than 150 years later), one finds passages such as

Nothing, at this moment, could be wilder, or more supernatural, than the scene. The moon was just rising, and illuminated the calm waters of the Pacific, and the torn, bloodstained earth of the island of Tahíti, with a southern softness, most beautiful to behold. The tops of the trees, on either side of the plain; the ranks of the reposing warriors; and the confused heap of captives, crouching on the ground, were, here and there, partially and picturesquely shown forth, by the same lovely and brilliant light. While, the innermost portions of the rocks, that girded at each extremity, the shore, and the Temple walls, with the dead around them, shrouded in deep obscurity, contrasted grandly with the moon-brightened scenery just described. Then, there were the islets, far out on the reefs, glowing unshadowed, in the splendour of the night atmosphere; and the forests and mountains, far away in the inland distance, here dimly lightened, there reposing in a soft and uninterrupted darkness[,]<sup>59</sup>

and while some contemporary reviewers of *Antonina* praised Collins's 'painterly eye for description',<sup>60</sup> others disparaged his tendency to 'revel[.] in pictorial display to a degree frequently detrimental to the dramatic character of the work—causing the action to halt'.<sup>61</sup> In the opening pages of the story, for example, there occurs a notably pictorial description of the Gothic army at rest:

Near a confused mass of weapons, scattered on the ground, reclined a group of warriors apparently listening to the low, muttered conversation of three men of great age, who rose above them, seated on pieces of rock, and whose long, white hair, rough skin dresses, and lean tottering forms, appeared in strong contrast with the iron-clad and gigantic figures of their auditors beneath. Above the old men, on the high

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<sup>58</sup> W. W[ilkie] C[ollins], 'Magnetic Evenings at Home. Letter III—To G. H. Lewes', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 100 (February 21 1852), pp. 183-84 (p. 184).

<sup>59</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Ioláni; or, Tahíti as it was. A Romance*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> 'Antonina, or the Fall of Rome', *The Spectator*, vol. 23, no. 1133 (March 16 1850), pp. 257-58; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> 'Antonina; or the Fall of Rome. A Romance of the Fifth Century', *The Eclectic Review*, vol. 27 (April 1850), pp. 491-95 (p. 493).

road, was one of Alaric's waggons; and on the heaps of baggage piled against its clumsy wheels, had been chosen the resting-place of the future conqueror of Rome. The top of the vehicle seemed absolutely teeming with a living burden. Perched in every available nook and corner, were women and children of all ages, and weapons and live stock of all varieties. Now, a child—lively, mischievous, inquisitive—peered forth over the head of a battering ram. Now, a lean, hungry sheep, advanced his inquiring nostrils sadly to the open air; and displayed by the movement, the head of a withered old woman, pillowed on his woolly flanks. Here, appeared a young girl, struggling, half entombed in shields. There, gasped an emaciated camp-follower, nearly suffocated in heaps of furs. The whole scene, with its background of great woods, drenched in a vapour of misty rain; with its striking contrasts at one point and its solemn harmonies at another, presented a vast combination of objects that either startled or awed;—a gloomy conjunction of the menacing and the sublime.<sup>62</sup>

In the words of Dorothy Sayers, this 'purely static' passage reads 'not like a description of the thing itself, but like a catalogue description of a canvas'; it 'strongly calls to mind one of those vast "historical compositions", rather over-oily in texture and rather brown in the shadows, which the artist of the day was expected to produce for the Academy'.<sup>63</sup> Like *Rambles Beyond Railways* and 'Magnetic Evenings at Home', *Antonina* also evidences Collins's fondness for calling on the most celebrated of the Old Masters to adorn his more self-consciously pictorial moments:

When the figure of the young warrior, arrayed in his martial habiliments, and standing near the insensible girl with evident emotions of wonder and anxiety, was added to the group thus produced,—when Goisvintha's tall, powerful frame, clothed in dark garments, and bent over the fragile form and white dress of the fugitive, was illuminated by the wild, fitful glare of the torch,—when the heightened colour, worn features, and eager expression of the woman were beheld, here shadowed, there brightened, in close opposition to the pale, youthful, reposing countenance of the girl, such an assemblage of violent lights and deep shades was produced, as gave the whole scene a character at once mysterious and sublime. It presented an harmonious variety of solemn colours, united by the exquisite artifice of Nature to a grand, yet simple disposition of form. It was a picture executed by the hand of Rembrandt, and imagined by the mind of Raphael.<sup>64</sup>

Although there is no reference to Raphael or Rembrandt in *Basil*, it too contains strongly visual passages: a contemporary critic noted that Collins's 'descriptive faculty, whether

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<sup>62</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Antonina; or, The Fall of Rome. A Romance of the Fifth Century* (3 vols) (London: Richard Bentley, 1850), vol. I, pp. 17-19.

<sup>63</sup> Sayers, *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>64</sup> Collins, *Antonina*, vol. II, pp. 29-30.

employed on London localities or the wild cliffs of Cornwall, is vividly pictorial',<sup>65</sup> and a more recent commentator calls it 'an extraordinarily pictorial book, its march of action constantly halted for the production of painstaking visual surveys'.<sup>66</sup> Collins's memorably visual portrayal of Mr Sherwin's drawing room at North Villa is discussed in detail in chapter 2 below, while his representation of the hamlet in Cornwall in which Basil seeks refuge from Mannion might be an account of another of his father's paintings:

From the churchyard, I look down the ravine, on fine days, towards the sea. Mighty piles of granite soar above the fishermen's cottages on each side: the little strip of white sand beach which the cliffs shut in, glows pure in the sunlight: the inland stream that trickles down the bed of the rocks, sparkles, at places, like a rivulet of silver-fire: the round white clouds, with their violet shadows and bright wavy edges, roll on majestically above me (vol. III, pp. 227-28),

This kind of overtly pictorial description is also a feature of the novels that came after *Basil*; indeed, in the view of one critic writing in 1876, all Collins's early works were marked by 'picturesque [...] writing more distinctly than by ingenious evolution of plot [...]; causing us [...] to share the author's own apparent indifference to the progress of his story'.<sup>67</sup> To take just one example, his next book, *Hide and Seek* (1854), contains an explicitly 'picturesque and beautiful' 'living picture' of a group of children in a garden:

In the centre stood the deaf and dumb child, dressed in a white frock, with a little silk mantilla over it [...]. She wore a plain straw hat, ornamented with a morsel of narrow white ribbon, and tied under the chin with the same material. [...]

She stood near the window, the centre figure of the group, offering a little slate that hung by her side, with a pencil attached to it, to the rector's eldest daughter, who was sitting at her right hand on a stool. The second of the young ladies knelt on the other side, with both her arms round the dog's neck [...]. Both the Doctor's daughters were healthy, rosy English beauties in the first bloom of girlhood; and both were attired in the simplest and prettiest muslin dresses, very delicate in colour and pattern. Pity and

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<sup>65</sup> 'Basil: A Story of Modern Life', *The Globe*, no. 16965 (November 25 1852), p. 1; see also 'Basil: a Story of Modern Life', *John Bull*, vol. 32, no. 1669 (December 4 1852), p. 780 (some scenes are 'delineated [...] with the full force of that graphic pen which has rendered the author's name illustrious in the literature of fiction'); 'A Trio of Novels. Esmond, Reuben Medlicot, and Basil', *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 241 (January 1853), pp. 70-79; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 41 (the story is 'full of carefully finished pictures').

<sup>66</sup> Lindsay Errington, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art, 1840-1860* (PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, 1973) (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), p. 421.

<sup>67</sup> 'The Book Market', *The Daily Telegraph*, no. 6635 (September 11 1876), p. 6.

admiration, mixed with some little perplexity and confusion, gave an unusual animation to their expressions; for they could hardly accustom themselves as yet to the idea of the poor child's calamity. [...] The varying expressions of the three; the difference in their positions; the charming contrast between their light graceful figures and the bulky strength and grand solidity of form in the noble Newfoundland dog who stood among them; the lustrous background of lawn and flowers and trees, seen through the open window; the sparkling purity of the sunshine which fell brightly over one part of the group; the transparency of the warm shadows that lay so caressingly, sometimes on a round smooth cheek, sometimes over ringlets of glistening hair, sometimes on the crisp folds of a muslin dress—all these accidental combinations of the moment, these natural and elegant positions of nature's setting, these accessories of light and shade, and back-ground garden objects beautifully and tenderly filling up the scene, presented together a picture which it was a luxury to be able to look on, which it seemed little short of absolute profanation to disturb.<sup>68</sup>

Significantly, however, *Basil*, like *Hide and Seek* and all the novels that followed, lacks one notable characteristic of Collins's very early books. In his first published works, the apprentice writer seems frequently to be unsure of his ability to portray in words what might be better represented in visual form. In his biography of his father, for example, Collins claimed to be unable adequately to describe a scene in Rome that had 'inspired the painter with emotions not easily forgotten':

It was evening; the friars had retired, after singing before the little chapels placed round the interior of the mighty ruin; darkness was approaching. Beneath the tall crucifix in the middle of the arena, knelt a peasant woman, prostrate in adoration, and a Carmelite monk beating his breast—the two last-left worshippers at the holy symbol. At some distance from them stood a penitent—his face covered with a hood pierced with two apertures for the eyes—looking spectral, as his veiled, motionless form half disappeared in the gathering gloom. The glorious arches of the Colosseum, showing doubly mysterious and sublime in the dim, fading light cast down on them from the darkening sky, alone surrounded this solemn scene, whose tragic grandeur is to be painted, but not to be described.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, in *Rambles Beyond Railways* he confessed that he had nothing to say about St. Germain, in reference to whose 'only local curiosity [...]—its noble old Church—I am superseded by my companion, who has already described it with his pencil, much better than

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<sup>68</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek* (3 vols) (London: Richard Bentley, 1854), vol. I, pp. 161-64.

<sup>69</sup> Collins, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, vol. II, p. 97.

I could with my pen', and wrote of the Land's End that

The whole bold view possesses all the sublimity that vastness and space can bestow; but it is that sublimity which is to be seen, not described, which the heart may acknowledge and the mind contain, but which no mere words may delineate, which even painting itself may but faintly reflect.<sup>70</sup>

The same insecurity is apparent in Collins's earliest fiction. He portrayed the climax of Vetrano's 'Banquet of Famine' in *Antonina* as a tableau in which

The wild disorder of the richly-laden tables; the wine flowing over the floor from overthrown vases; the great lamps burning bright and steady over the confusion beneath; the fierce gestures, the disordered countenances of the revellers, as they waved their jewelled cups over their heads in frantic triumph; and then, the gloomy and terrific prospect at the lower end of the hall—the black curtain, the light burning solitary on its high pole, the dead boy lying across the festal table, the living master standing by his side, and, like an evil spirit, pointing upward in mockery to the white-robed corpse of the woman, as it towered above all in its unnatural position, with its skinny arms stretched forth, with its ghastly features appearing to move as the faint and flickering light played over them—produced together such a combination of scarce-earthly objects, as might be painted, but cannot be described[.]<sup>71</sup>

and he expressed a similar inability to write what might be painted – and had in fact been drawn and engraved by his friend Millais for the frontispiece to the book (figure 0.1) – in his

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<sup>70</sup> Collins, *Rambles Beyond Railways*, pp. 23; 197.

<sup>71</sup> Collins, *Antonina*, vol. III, pp. 104-105.



Figure 0.1: John Everett Millais, frontispiece to *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* (1851), etching, 15.6 × 12.5 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1966) (Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

description of Annie Wray, the heroine of *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box*:

She is very quietly and neatly dressed; looks about eighteen or nineteen years of age; and has something in her face which I can only characterise by the epithet—loveable. There is a beauty of innocence and purity about her forehead, brow, and eyes [...]. Mixed up, however, with the girlish gentleness and innocence which form her more prominent charm, there is a look of firmness—especially noticeable about the expression of her lips—that gives a certain character and originality to her face. Her figure ——

I stop at her figure. Not by any means for want of phrases to describe it; but from a disheartening conviction of the powerlessness of any description of her at all to produce the right effect on the minds of others. If I were asked in what particular efforts of literature the poverty of literary material most remarkably appears, I should answer, in personal descriptions of heroines. We have all read these by the hundred—

some of them so carefully and finely finished, that we are not only informed about the lady's eyes, eyebrows, nose, cheeks, complexion, mouth, teeth, neck, ears, head, hair, and the way it was dressed; but are also made acquainted with the particular manner in which the sentiments below made the bosom above heave or swell; besides the exact position of head in which her eyelashes were just long enough to cast a shadow on her cheeks. We have read all this attentively and admiringly, as it deserves; and have yet risen from the reading, without the remotest approach to a realisation in our own minds of what sort of a woman the heroine really was. We vaguely knew she was beautiful, at the beginning of the description; and we know just as much—just as vaguely—at the end.

Penetrated with the conviction above-mentioned, I prefer leaving the reader (assisted by a striking likeness in the frontispiece) to form his own realisation of the personal appearance of the customer at Messrs Dunball and Dark's.<sup>72</sup>

(Collins had expressed his preference for visual rather than verbal description of fictional heroines even more forcefully in the first draft of the story, where he initially wrote – before crossing it out and replacing it with something closer to the last paragraph of the printed text just quoted –

I can only suggest, as a remedy for this deficiency, the future substitution of a portrait engraved for a portrait paragraph in forthcoming novels. By writing Miss So and So was – exactly like the accompanying plate, we might save ourselves and our readers infinite trouble – give graphic ideas of our heroines and graphic employment to our brethren of the Fine Arts.)<sup>73</sup>

No such profession of the superior representative power of the painted picture over the written word, no such need to allude to visual referents outside the text, can be found in *Basil*. On the contrary, as this thesis seeks to show, in that novel Collins for the first time expresses the view that the writer of fiction has available to him artistic resources that are unavailable to the painter, and in particular to the painter of portraits.

The principal reason for Collins's growth in self-confidence as a writer must be that shortly before he began to write *Basil* his social circle, which had previously consisted largely of painters, had been significantly altered by what soon became a very close friendship with

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<sup>72</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box; or, The Mask and the Mystery. A Christmas Sketch* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), pp. 4-6.

<sup>73</sup> British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 88<sup>r</sup>.

Charles Dickens; indeed, one early biographer went so far as to say that from the time of Collins's first meeting with Dickens in 1851 'may be dated his vocation to letters as a profession'.<sup>74</sup> Dickens is said to have been in the audience at Collins's production of Goldsmith's *The Good Natur'd Man*, put on at the family home in Hanover Terrace, Regent's Park in June 1849,<sup>75</sup> and it is possible that he was also aware of *A Court Duel*, which Collins wrote, produced, and appeared in at Miss Kelly's Theatre in February 1850, in aid of the Female Emigration Fund. In any event, in March 1851 Dickens invited Collins through their mutual friend Augustus Egg to take 'a small part—but, what there is of it, decidedly good'<sup>76</sup> in *Not So Bad as We Seem: or, Many Sides to a Character*, a play written by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton and produced by Dickens to raise funds for the Guild of Literature and Art. The play was first performed at Devonshire House in May 1851, in the presence of Queen Victoria, and further performances took place in London and other cities between June 1851 and August 1852, by which time Collins had both made a marked success of a more significant role<sup>77</sup> and become an intimate friend of Dickens. (Indeed, as is noted in chapter 1 below, Collins not only undertook the final revisions to the manuscript of *Basil* while he was staying with Dickens in Dover in September 1852 but also cited Dickens as the instigator of his demand for a considerably higher price for the book than his publisher would otherwise have been prepared to pay.) As well as Dickens, the company included Mark Lemon, playwright and editor of *Punch*, and Douglas Jerrold, also a playwright and member of the

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<sup>74</sup> Seccombe, 'Collins, William Wilkie', p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> See Mrs E. M. Ward, *Mrs. E. M. Ward's Reminiscences*, ed. E. O'Donnell (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1911), p. 78 ('[A]mong the audience were many painters and writers of note, including Frith, Millais, and Charles Dickens').

<sup>76</sup> Charles Dickens, letter to Augustus Egg, 8 March 1852: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6 (ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Nina Burgis) (1988), p. 310.

<sup>77</sup> See Charles Dickens, letter to Mrs Charles Dickens, 12 February 1852: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, p. 596-97 (p. 596) ('Collins was *admirable*—got up excellently, played thoroughly well, and missed nothing'); Wilkie Collins, letter to Harriet Collins, 13 February 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 60-61 (p. 60) ('My part, you will be glad to hear, was played [...] so as to produce some very warm congratulations from my manager, and indeed from the whole company').

staff of *Punch*, whom Collins described after his early death in 1857 as ‘one of the first and the dearest friends of my literary life’,<sup>78</sup> and Collins’s pleasure in these new friendships is apparent from the manuscript of *Basil*, where he not only imitated the signatures of Lemon and Jerrold (figure 0.2) but also practised writing his own name in imitation of those

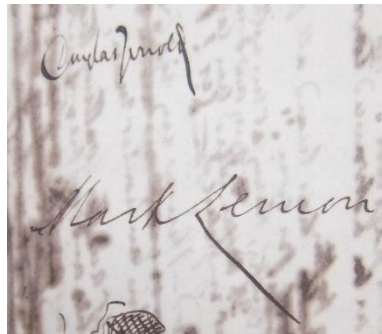


Figure 0.2: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 53 (verso) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

signatures, as well as that of Dickens himself (figure 0.3). It is surely indicative of this move

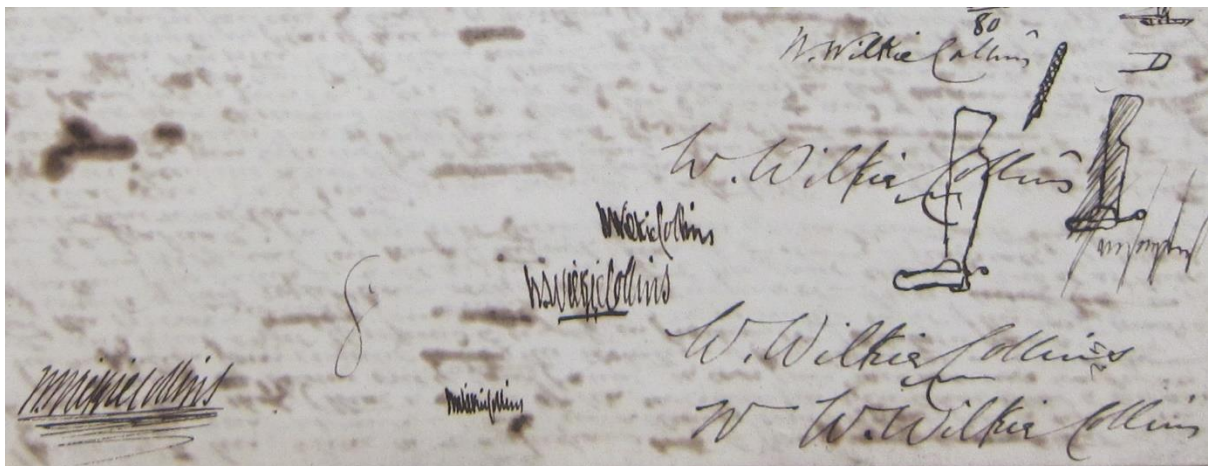


Figure 0.3: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 61 (verso) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

into an unequivocally ‘literary life’ that in the prefaces to each of the two works of fiction that followed *Basil* Collins should have spoken in almost valedictory terms of his life ‘in the society of artists’: in *Hide and Seek* (itself dedicated to Dickens ‘as a token of admiration and affection, by his friend, the author’) he claimed to have ‘had more opportunities than most men, out of the profession, of observing what the varieties of artist-life, and the eccentricities

<sup>78</sup> Wilkie Collins, *My Miscellanies* (2 vols) (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Co., 1863), vol. II, p. 75.

of artist-character, are really like, when they are looked at close',<sup>79</sup> while in *After Dark* (1856) (a collection of short stories, all but one of which had been commissioned by Dickens and first published in *Household Words*, now connected by a framework narrated by a portrait painter who has himself turned from painting to writing) he wrote of his 'object to give the reader one more glimpse of that artist-life which circumstances have afforded me peculiar opportunities of studying'.<sup>80</sup>

It is against that background that this thesis seeks to make its principal argument, that Collins was concerned in *Basil* to compare two contemporary aesthetics, one of portraiture and one of prose fiction, in such a way as to demonstrate that the latter affords the creative artist greater possibilities than the former. That argument is developed over the first four chapters of the thesis. Chapter 1, 'What am I now about to write?' (the words with which Basil begins his narrative), is concerned with the manuscript of the first draft of *Basil*, and establishes that that draft was written between June and November 1851, and not in 1852 as has been assumed by previous scholars. Chapter 2, 'Everything was oppressively new' (the title comes from Basil's account of the furnishings of Mr Sherwin's drawing room, an analysis of which forms the central topic of the chapter), considers the extent to which the text engages with specific aesthetic and cultural issues that were to the fore in the summer of 1851, in particular Pre-Raphaelitism and the Great Exhibition; that leads to a discussion in chapter 3, 'A right reading of the externals of character' (the phrase used by the portrait-painter narrator of *After Dark* to describe the essence of his art), of the way in which the upper-class Basil's verbal portraits of the characters whom he encounters in his foray into middle-class life – Mr Sherwin, his managing clerk Mannion, and his daughter Margaret – imitate an aesthetic of

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<sup>79</sup> Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol. I, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>80</sup> Wilkie Collins, *After Dark* (2 vols) (London: Smith, Elder, 1856), vol. I, p. v.

naturalism in portraiture, intended to enable the viewer to effect a physiognomical reading of the character of the sitter, that was in the early 1850s being advocated both by Collins himself and by his friend Tom Taylor and put into practice, in different ways, by Millais and another close painter friend of Collins, E. M. Ward. But while Collins causes Basil to imitate that aesthetic of portraiture, he also undercuts the imitation by making Basil unable to understand the significance for the characters of Mannion and Margaret of what he sees and describes to the reader. Chapter 4, 'The poetry of every-day truth' (the title is taken from Collins's account of the aesthetic in accordance with which he claimed to have written *Basil*), turns from painting to prose: it seeks to identify the inspiration for the manifesto for fiction that Collins sets out in the Letter of Dedication to Charles James Ward that serves as a preface to the novel. While previous scholars have located that inspiration in John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* or the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, it is argued here that it derives from G. H. Lewes's reviews of novels in *The Leader*, with which Collins was closely associated at the time that he was writing *Basil*. Collins not only adopts Lewes's aesthetic of 'reality' in fiction as his own but also ascribes it to Basil, who is figured as a writer whose literary ambition and career closely parallel Collins's. Whereas Basil's imitation of the aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture is undercut, therefore, his imitation of the literary aesthetic of 'reality' is not; rather, it is enhanced by Collins's identification of Basil with himself as a writer. It is argued that Collins was concerned not only to contrast Basil's imitations of the two aesthetics but also to highlight the greater possibilities for the representation of character that are available to the novelist than to the portrait painter, inasmuch as the former, unlike the latter, can deploy irony to expose the fallibility of their narrator. By way of brief coda, chapter 5, 'Sympathies that lie too deep for words' (a phrase, echoing Wordsworth's 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears', that is derived from Walter Hartright's account of his portrait of Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* – a passage that also contains the phrase 'the deeper

reach of [...] pen' from which the thesis takes its title), considers the way in which in *The Woman in White*, published eight years after *Basil*, Collins returned to, and seems significantly to have developed his thinking about, the subject of the representational capabilities of portraiture and fiction respectively.

Not only is the principal argument entirely original, but the thesis breaks new ground in many other respects. Although a few critics and biographers have looked at the manuscript of *Basil*, they have overlooked its significance as a source of information as to when the first draft of the novel was written. In particular, it has not previously been noticed that – as is discussed in chapter 1 – the manuscript contains a draft of an article on a political subject for *The Leader* in July 1851; that discovery not only serves to date the composition of *Basil* but also sheds valuable new light on Collins's connection with *The Leader*. The precise dating of the composition of the novel to the summer and autumn of 1851 leads in chapter 2 to a wholly original close reading of Basil's description of the drawing room at North Villa in relation to debates about good and bad taste in domestic furnishings prompted by the Great Exhibition, and in particular the view held by those most closely associated with the promotion and organisation of the Exhibition that bad taste was equivalent to bad morals. Chapter 2 then goes on, as does chapter 3, to draw attention to significant but previously understudied writings on art, and in particular portraiture, by Collins and by his friend Tom Taylor; those writings serve as important context for the discussion that follows of an equally significant but understudied series of portraits of writers by Collins's and Taylor's mutual close friend E. M. Ward. It has already been noted that chapter 4 breaks new ground in suggesting that G. H. Lewes, rather than John Ruskin, was the inspiration for the realist aesthetic of fiction proclaimed in the preface to *Basil*; it has not been noted, however, that that chapter makes the further original argument that Lewes's, and hence Collins's, aesthetic was significantly

indebted to the critical writing of William Hazlitt a generation earlier. Finally, chapter 5 suggests for the first time that *The Woman in White* discloses the influence of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), whose author had been publicly identified as the partner of Collins's old friend Lewes just before Collins began work on his new novel.

The first step in the process of contextualising *Basil* in the cultural moment of its composition is to establish precisely when that moment was, and that question is addressed in the first chapter.

## CHAPTER 1: 'WHAT AM I NOW ABOUT TO WRITE?'

This chapter is concerned with the holograph manuscript of *Basil*, held in the British Library (Add. MS 41060, folios 1-86). It seeks to establish the manner in which, and in particular the time at which, Collins wrote the book, as to which the manuscript is a valuable, albeit previously overlooked, source of information.

The first draft of the novel occupies 84 pages of the manuscript (folios 1-36 and 39-86).<sup>1</sup> With one exception,<sup>2</sup> the sheets of paper on which that draft was written were originally about 29 cm high (although some have been trimmed or cut horizontally), and about 44.5 cm wide; the sheets were folded or (mostly) cut in half, to form two pages each about 22 cm wide. Each full page contains between about 1200 and 1600 words, written in black ink in a very small and cramped hand: figure 1.1 shows the text of folio 1<sup>r</sup> at approximately 90 per

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<sup>1</sup> As is noted below, folios 37 and 38 are from what was intended to be the revised final draft.

<sup>2</sup> The exception is folio 44, which is – like those on which Count Fosco writes his confession – a ‘narrow slip[.], of the form used by professional writers for the press’ (Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 607); it is about half the width and three-quarters of the height of the other pages.



aggravated by the very numerous deletions and insertions to the text – and in places all but impossible, particularly where the ink has bled into the paper.

The manuscript text is divided into two volumes – volume 1 ends at the bottom of folio 41<sup>r</sup>, at the conclusion of the climactic chapter XXII (chapter VII of Part II of the printed text (vol. II, p. 162)), in which Basil discovers Mannion’s and Margaret’s plot and assaults Mannion in the street – and it appears from the contract between Collins and the publisher Richard Bentley, which provided for the sale of the copyright of and in ‘a work of fiction at present intended to be called “Basil or passages from the life of a young man” sufficient in extent to form two volumes in post 8<sup>vo</sup> of the usual size’,<sup>3</sup> that the novel was originally agreed to be published in that form. (Collins seems to have disliked the three-volume format in which the great majority of new novels were published, regarding the cost of buying three volumes as a significant deterrent to private purchasers while recognising that such a deterrent suited the circulating libraries who were by far the most significant buyers of fiction; he wrote to Richard Bentley’s son George in 1853 to applaud the firm’s decision to ‘lead the way in lowering the present extravagantly absurd prices charged for works of fiction’ by reducing to one third the price of all new and some previously published novels – including *Basil*<sup>4</sup> – and added:

I should be inclined to doubt the propriety of still adhering to the three volume form, if I did not believe that you know the “Manners and Customs” of Librarians much better than I do and are able to calculate much better than I can on the increase of sale among the Libraries generally, which is likely to be produced by the decrease in

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<sup>3</sup> British Library, Add. MS 46616, folio 186. Although the contract is dated 8 December 1852, it is clear that it must have been drawn up before *Basil* was published on 16 November – probably on 8 October, as soon as Bentley and Collins had agreed terms. The date ‘December’ was either a mistake or, more likely, a way of deferring Bentley’s liability under the promissory notes given in payment, which were stated to be payable at four and seven months from the date of the contract.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bentley’s advertisements in *The Athenæum*, no. 1355 (October 15 1853), p. 1212, and *The Spectator*, vol. 26, no. 1320 (October 15 1853), p. 1003.

prices.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding that his contract with Collins provided for publication in two volumes, however, Bentley – of whom it has been said that he ‘could be called (in language of a later date) the “king of the three-decker”’<sup>6</sup> – seems to have insisted for commercial reasons on publishing in three. On 1 October 1852 Collins wrote to him to state that he had been advised by Charles Dickens to demand ‘three hundred and fifty pounds (unconditionally paid), as the purchase money for the entire copyright of the book (unconditionally sold)’,<sup>7</sup> and on 6 October Bentley replied, accepting Collins’s ‘ultimatum’ but noting that ‘To give Three Hundred and Fifty Pounds for a novel in Two volumes will require a much larger number of copies to be sold, than any of your previous Works have sold and will leave little chance of profit to your Publisher’.<sup>8</sup> Some indication of the timescale within which those two volumes were written can be gained from folio 8<sup>v</sup> of the manuscript (figure 1.2), where Collins jotted

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<sup>5</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to George Bentley, 17 August 1853: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 87-88 (p. 87).

<sup>6</sup> Guinevere L. Griest, ‘A Victorian Leviathan: Mudie’s Select Library’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 20, no. 2 (September 1965), pp. 103-26 (p. 110).

<sup>7</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 1 October 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 78-79. As Collins acknowledged in that letter, just three weeks earlier he had asked Bentley to make an offer for *Basil*, ‘as I had no idea myself what to ask for it’; it must have been his subsequent visit to Dickens in Dover that emboldened him to demand a much higher amount than Bentley – who confessed that the sum mentioned ‘did startle me a good deal’ (Richard Bentley, letter to Wilkie Collins, 6 October 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 79) – would have been likely to suggest. Although Collins had initially asked for £200 for the copyright in *Antonina* (see Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 22 November 1849: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 58-59), Bentley agreed to pay only £100, with a further £100 to follow if more than 500 copies were sold (see Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 26 November 1849: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 35-36), and Bentley was only prepared to pay £150 for *Hide and Seek* in May 1854 (albeit in that case the copyright was assigned for just eighteen months) (see British Library, Add. MS 46616, folio 309).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bentley, letter to Wilkie Collins, 6 October 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 79. The consequence of Bentley’s insistence on publishing *Basil* in three volumes rather than two was that what had originally been envisaged as volume 2, which Collins predicted would ‘run to 350 pages, unless they print close’ (Wilkie Collins, letter to Charles Ward, 16 September 1852: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 90-91 (p. 91)), in fact ran to some 450 pages spread over one and a half volumes. It is perhaps unsurprising that one reviewer was led to observe that the three volumes of *Basil* ‘are as thin and spare in quantity of matter, as any volumes we ever saw’ (*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*, *The Age*, no. 32 (January 8 1853), p. 6).

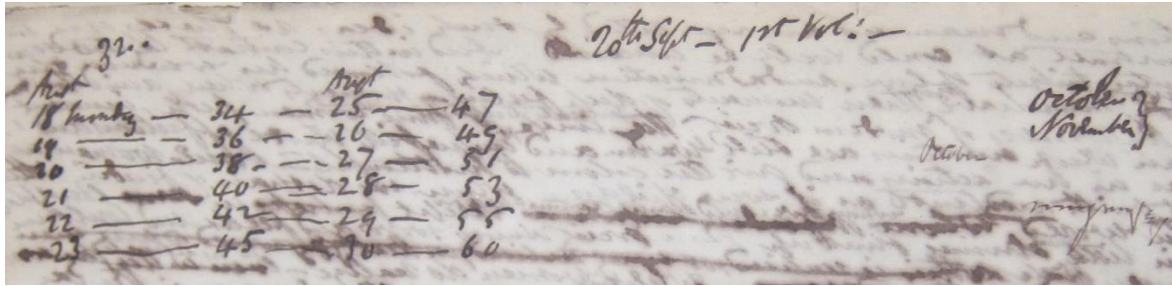


Figure 1.2: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 8 (verso) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

down a detailed timetable for the completion of volume 1. That timetable reads:

32

Aug[us]t 18 Monday	34
19	36
20	38
21	40
22	42
23	45

Aug[us]t 25	47
26	49
27	51
28	53
29	55
30	60

20<sup>th</sup> Sept – 1<sup>st</sup> Vol.

October )  
November )

Although it is not clear what scale of measurement is represented by the numbers in the right-hand column, it is the same scale as appears at folio 55<sup>r</sup> (figure 1.3). At the end of chapter IV

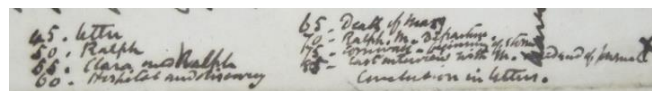


Figure 1.3: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 55 (recto) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

of volume 2 of the manuscript text (vol. II, p. 303 of the printed text), just before he began to write Mannion's letter to Basil, Collins identified in the margin the chief events of the remainder of the work, as well as the point at which each was to occur:

45. letter  
50. Ralph

- 55. Clara and Ralph
- 60. Hospital and discovery
- 65. Death of Marg
- 70. Ralph, M, departure
- 75. Cornwall – beginning of storm
- 85. Last interview with M. and end of Journal
- Conclusion in letters.

The scale appears again at folio 61<sup>v</sup> (figure 1.4), in what seems to be a note made by Collins

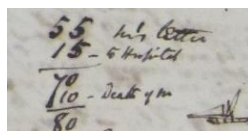


Figure 1.4: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 61 (verso) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

as he finished writing Mannion’s letter, which ends at the bottom of the facing folio 62<sup>r</sup> (vol. III, p. 74 of the printed text). It seems that the letter, which he had expected to end at point 45, had exceeded its originally anticipated length and would now end at point 55, and that a revised calculation was required: ‘55 M’s letter; 15 – to Hospital [=] 70; 10 – death of M. [=] 80’. If the death of Margaret was now to be at point 80 rather than point 65 as he had previously calculated, then Collins must have expected that the last interview with Mannion and the end of the Journal would now be at point 100 rather than at point 85, to be followed by the ‘conclusion in letters’. Excluding the Letters in Conclusion at the end of volume 2 (which amount to some 5,000 words), volumes 1 and 2 of the manuscript text occupy much the same number of pages (39 and 38 respectively) and are much the same length (very approximately 57,500 words each). In the circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that when Collins drew up the timetable at folio 8<sup>v</sup>, he envisaged that the end of volume 1 would also be at approximately point 100. The timetable clearly plots the progress to completion of that volume. Collins had reached point 32, approximately one-third of the way through volume 1, at the time that he made this note. He then intended to reach point 45 within six days, point 60 within a further six days, and to complete volume 1 (that is, to reach point 100) by 20 September, leaving the remaining volume 2 to be written in October and November. As a

matter of arithmetic, his plan seems to have been to write something like 7,500 words in the six days between 18 and 23 August, and a further 8,500 words in the six days between 25 and 30 August.

It is clear, then, that Collins, who claimed to have ‘thought long over what I desired to do, before I ventured to take pen in hand’ (vol. I, p. x), intended to work fast once he had so ventured. That confirms the dominant impression created by the manuscript, which is of the speed at which the first draft of *Basil* was written. Time and again it can be seen that Collins’s principal concern was to get words down on the page as quickly as possible. Not only does he seem not to have paused between sentences or even paragraphs to ponder what he was about to write, but he appears seldom, if ever, to have interrupted the flow of composition in order to revise or polish what he had already written. On occasion he wrote a sentence or paragraph twice in slightly different words, leaving it until later to choose which (if either) he preferred. For example, at folio 2<sup>r</sup> two consecutive paragraphs read:

The fisherman’s wife who prepares my food confessed to me but yesterday – good kind soul! with many contrite tears and much shame – that she had looked at my few books in my absence – to see if there were any strange magic characters in them – anything like the witchcraft which she had heard about in old Cornish legends.

All these particulars I have gathered from the fisherman’s wife who prepares my food and who confessed to me with much contrition – good simple soul! that she had even looked among the few books in my absence to see whether they did not exhibit some startling supernatural peculiarities.

(Neither variant appears in the printed text.) Again, at folio 59<sup>v</sup> the first version of Mannion’s letter to Basil reads:

I mention pride among her motives advisedly. She was proud of knowing herself to be the object of the secret aspirations of a man who looked on all the other human beings around him with the independence of contempt.

It was while her vanity was wounded by the manner of my departure from England that you met her and appealed to that vanity in a new direction. You must have seen clearly enough that your proposals far exceeded the most ambitious expectations formed by her father. No man’s alliance could have really lifted her higher out of her own class than yours – she knew this and she married you.

On the facing sheet, folio 60<sup>r</sup>, that was redrafted and expanded into a form much closer to the printed text (vol. III, pp. 52-53), but without deleting what had already been written:

I mention pride among her motives advisedly. She was proud of being the object of my aspirations because she fancied that they yielded her the power of ruling a man whom she knew to be capable of ruling others. The manner of my departing from England showed her too plainly that she had miscalculated her influence over me, and that the power with her, as with others, was on my side. Hence the wound to her vanity to which I have alluded.

It was while that wound was still fresh, that you met her, and appealed to her vanity in a new direction. You must have seen clearly enough that such proposals as yours far exceeded the most ambitious expectations formed by her father. No man's alliance could have lifted her much higher out of her own class than yours. She knew this and through that knowledge married you – married you for your station, for your name, for your great friends and connections, for your father's money, and carriages, and fine houses – for everything, in short, but yourself.

The same concern to press on at all costs can be seen at those points in the manuscript where words and phrases are simply noted at the edges of a page, awaiting possible use in a revised draft. At folio 2<sup>r</sup> a number of fragmentary phrases and sentences – ‘built of rough granite, rudely thatched’; ‘This deepened the mystery to their eyes. They began to recal [*sic*] to memory old Cornish legends of strange people who had lived for years in different parts of the county – how coming none knew whence, existing none knew by what means’; ‘that I had only come to Cornwall to live in sweet air and to repair my health perplexed them afresh’ – are written at the top and in the margin of the page. All were later incorporated into the printed text (vol. III, pp. 224-25). Similarly, at folio 16<sup>v</sup> Collins jotted down a sentence that clearly struck him as felicitous and suitable to be deployed at some future point: ‘Hope and Vanity were ministering to Love, and the smoke of their incense lulled my heart into oblivion of all external influences – even to the long-loved influences of old familiar home’. The moment for its deployment was not long delayed: the same words, barely altered (‘Hope and Vanity were all that time ministering sweet services to Love, and the smoke of their incense lulled my heart into oblivion of all external influences – even to the long cherished influences of old familiar home’), reappear at folio 18<sup>r</sup> (and remain in the printed text (vol. I, p. 196)).

Also at folio 16<sup>v</sup> there appears a long disquisition by Basil on the selfishness of marriage (transcribed in the Appendix to this chapter) about which Collins seems to have changed his mind as soon as he wrote it, marking it for future use as ‘Speech for Mannion’. It then reappears in substantially the same words at folio 31<sup>r</sup> (also transcribed in the Appendix), this time in the mouth of Mannion as part of the conversation between him and Basil at the former’s house, only to be omitted from the printed text (vol. II, pp. 64-65) in this position also.

Another sign of the speed at which *Basil* was written is the way in which Collins indicated that passages of text were to be reordered and moved. Rather than take time to rewrite as he went along, he frequently reminded himself that a phrase was to be moved by simply quoting its first few words and then writing ‘&c &c’. Thus at folio 40<sup>f</sup> he noted that a few words (‘I heard the girl whisper to herself “My God Almighty! He’s dying”’) should in the next version appear at a different point in the paragraph (‘I never lost my consciousness – Whole years of the direst bodily and mental anguish were concentrated in that fatal moment. And yet I never lost my consciousness. I heard the girl whisper &c &c’ (vol. II, pp. 146-47 of the printed text)); he did the same thing further down on the same page to indicate that a sentence from folio 39<sup>f</sup> was to be moved to a new place: ‘After he had driven off and the last sound of the wheels had died away, I looked up at the sky. It was growing very dark. The ragged black clouds &c &c’ (vol. II, p. 150 of the printed text). The most substantial such move is the transposition of just under a thousand words of text from folio 2<sup>f</sup> to folio 77<sup>r</sup>. At the end of chapter I of volume 1 of the manuscript text (folio 1<sup>f</sup>), Collins wrote:

But before I occupy myself my Self [*sic*] with the past, it is fit that I should linger a moment over the present. A few words about this place of my repose, about the life that I now live in it will aptly [*illegible*] preface to my narrative. If I can [*illegible*] first for what I am now – I can more easily and freely proceed to the confession of what I was.

Chapter II (folio 2<sup>r</sup>) then contained a lengthy description of the life being led by the narrator in Cornwall (transcribed in the Appendix), beginning with an account of his cottage:

The little hamlet where my life has now been passed for the last month is on the southern coast of Cornwall – not more than a few miles distant from the Lands End. The cottage I occupy has but two rooms. I have no furniture but my bed my table and my chair. Some half dozen fishermen and their families are my only neighbours. Not two months back I should have scrupled to kennel my dogs in such a place as I now inhabit – I should have spent as a [illegible] my pocket-money the [illegible] pittance on which I now exist.

At some point while he was still writing the first draft, Collins decided that that description would fit better in the Journal that follows the narrator’s account of the events that have led to his taking refuge in that Cornish hamlet. At folio 77<sup>r</sup> of the manuscript text, as in the printed text (vol. III, p. 223), the substance of the last paragraph of folio 1<sup>r</sup> is repeated (albeit without any corresponding deletion or amendment to folio 1<sup>r</sup>): ‘But first, as no unfit introduction to the Journal I now propose to keep, let me say a word or two of the life I am leading in my retirement on the Cornish coast’. That is followed by two horizontal lines (figure 1.5); after

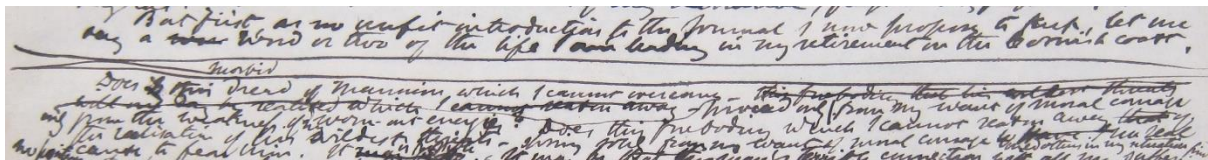


Figure 1.5: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 77 (recto) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

that break, the manuscript text, like the printed text (vol. III, p. 229), continues: ‘Does this morbid dread of Mannion which I cannot overcome proceed only from my want of moral courage, only from the weakness of worn-out energy?’ It seems clear that Collins left the two horizontal lines to remind himself that when it came to the next draft, the bulk of what he had written as chapter II of volume 1 was to be moved to this point.

In one instance the manuscript includes not only the first draft text but also subsequent versions, which give a particularly clear insight into Collins’s working methods. Early in chapter XXII of volume 1 of the manuscript text (chapter VII of Part II of the printed text),

Basil walks about London as he awaits the time when he is to collect Margaret from the fateful party at her aunt's house. The manuscript text (folio 39<sup>r</sup>) reads:

I felt no impatience – no sense of fatigue – in little more than a hour I knew that I should see Margaret again. Until that time the present had no existence for me – I lived in the past and future – I walked indifferently through lonely bye streets and crowded thoroughfares. Of all the thousand objects of horror or beauty which attend a night-walk in London, not one attracted my notice.

Further down the page is a series of fragmentary notes (figure 1.6), from which it can be seen

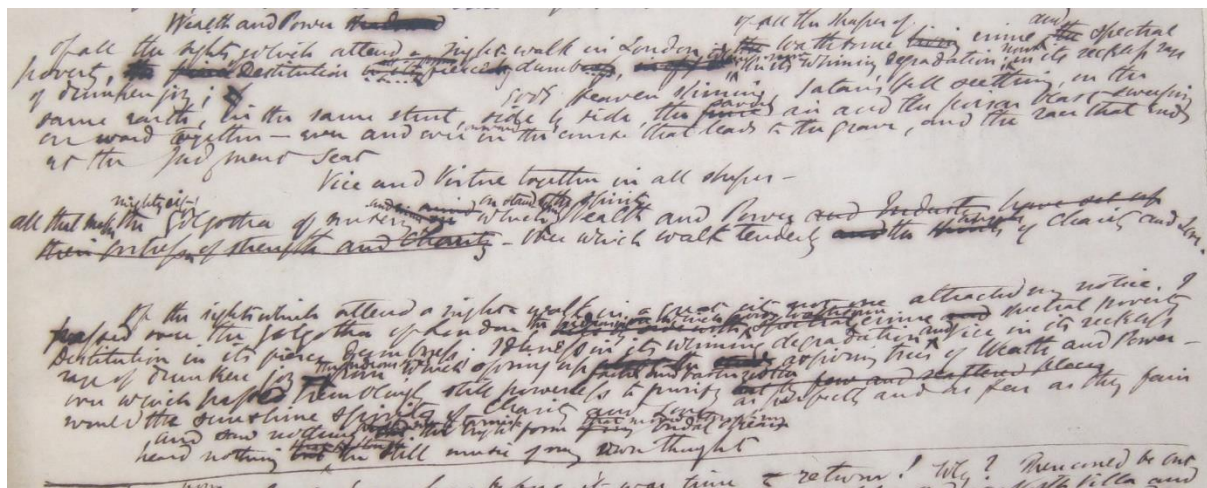


Figure 1.6: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 39 (recto) (part) (Image © British Library Board).

that Collins intended to develop the last sentence further, but to leave that development to the next draft:

#### Wealth and Power

Of all the sights which attend a night-walk in London – of all the shapes of loathsome crime and spectral poverty, Destitution fierce dumb, idleness [illegible] in its whining degradation; Vice in its reckless rage of drunken joy;

God's Heaven shining Satan's Hell seething, on the same earth, in the same street, side by side, the saving air and the poison blast sweeping onward together – ever and ever onward in the course that leads to the grave, and the race that ends at the Judgment Seat.

Vice and Virtue together in all shapes  
on stand the spirits

all that makes the mighty city a Golgotha of misery which Wealth and Power – over which walk tenderly the images of Charity and Love

Of the sights which attend a night's walk in a great city not one attracted my notice. I passed over the Golgotha of London the London in which grows loathsome crime spectral poverty Destitution in its fierce dumbness. Idleness in its whining degradation

and Vice in its reckless rage of drunken joy. The hideous [illegible] from which  
spring up faster and faster [illegible] aspiring trees of Wealth and Power – over which  
passed tremblingly still powerless to purify as perfectly and as far as they fain would  
the sunshine spirits of Charity and Love

and saw nothing to tarnish the bright form that moved through my bridal dream  
heard nothing to startle the still music of my own thought

Uniquely, the manuscript contains that next draft. Folio 37<sup>r</sup> (figure 1.7) is a page from what

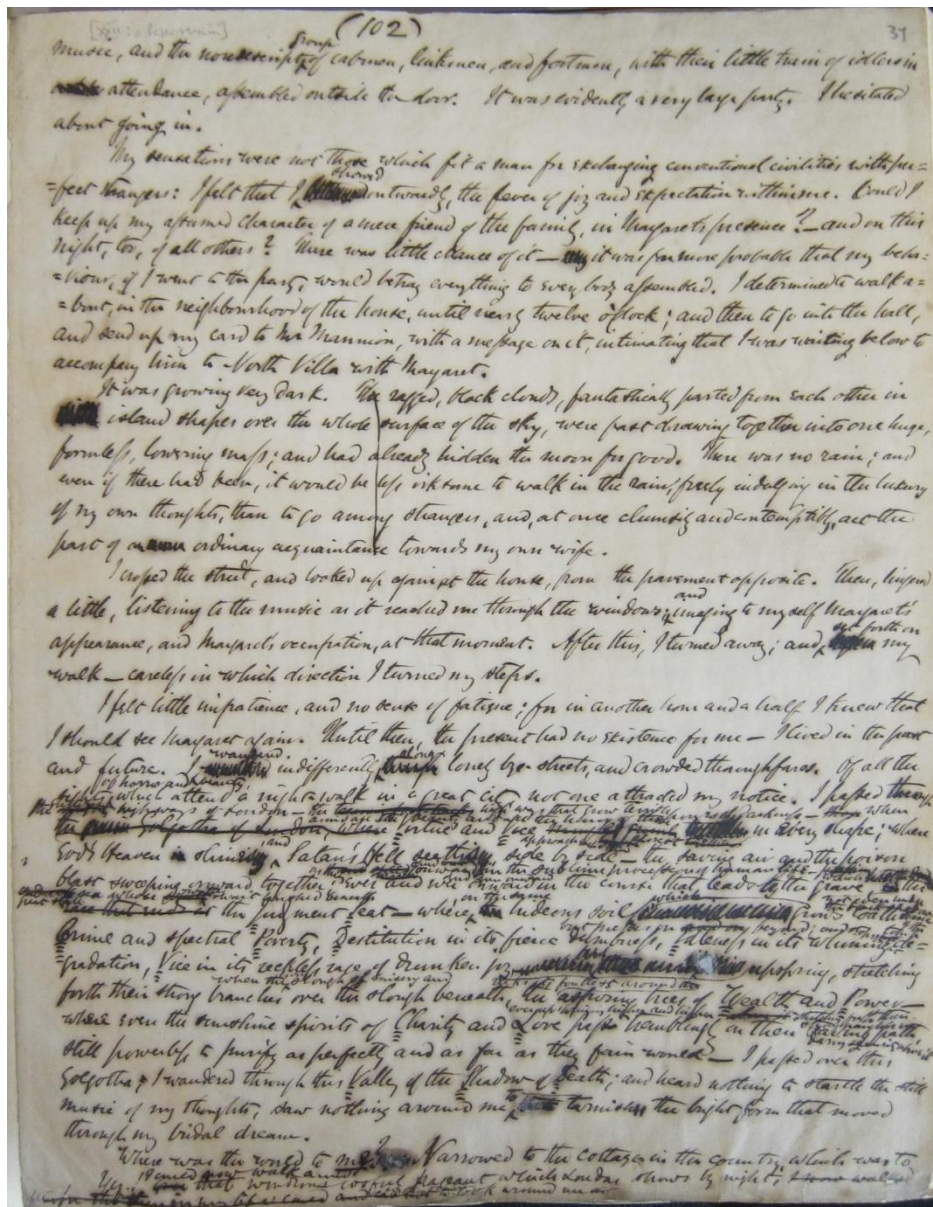


Figure 1.7: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 37 (recto) (Image © British Library Board).

was intended to be the final fair copy of the manuscript, to be sent to the publisher and then

the printer.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen in the lower part of the page, although Collins had reduced the miscellaneous notes at folio 39<sup>r</sup> to coherence, he began rewriting his text again, thus rendering the fair copy illegible and unfit for its intended purpose. The passage whose first draft was quoted above now reads:

I felt little impatience, and no sense of fatigue; for in another hour and a half I knew that I should see Margaret again. Until then, the present had no existence for me – I lived in the past and future. I wandered indifferently along lonely bye-streets, and crowded thoroughfares. Of all the sights of horror and beauty which attend a night-walk in a great city, not one attracted my notice. I passed through the glittering highways of London, the highways that grow terrible amid all the beauty and all the horror of these hours of darkness – when Virtue and Vice approach each other closest in every shape – when God’s Heaven shines and Satan’s Hell seethes side by side – the saving air and the poison blast sweeping onward together as they speed onward and ever onward in the sublime procession of human life – ever and ever onward in the course that leads to the grave, which halts not even under the black shadow of the tomb, the great still sea whose waters wait hushed beneath the Judgment Seat – when on the same hideous soil which grows loathsome Crime and spectral Poverty, Destitution in its fierce dumbness, Idleness in its whining degradation, Vice in its reckless rage of drunken joy when the living slough of misery and [word omitted in MS] reeks its foulest around the refreshing, stretching forth their strong branches ever [illegible] higher and higher, stretching forth their strong branches [illegible] security above it, the aspiring trees of Wealth and Power – when even the sunshine spirits of Charity and Love pass tremblingly on their saving path, still powerless to purify as perfectly and as far as they fain would – I passed over this Golgotha; I wandered through this Valley of the Shadow of Death; and heard nothing to startle the still music of my thoughts, saw nothing around me to tarnish the bright form that moved through my bridal dream.

What was the world to me? Narrowed to the cottage in the country, which was to Yes! I could now walk amid that wondrous woful [sic] pageant which London shows by night, walked and cared not to look around me

Like its predecessor, this draft also peters out in unfinished sentences, so that at folio 38<sup>r</sup>

(figure 1.8) Collins made a further attempt at a fair copy of what was clearly proving to be a

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<sup>9</sup> That folio 37 is a page of the final fair copy is indicated both by its legibility (including the careful underlining of letters intended to be capitalised by the printer) and by the numbering ‘(102)’ at the top of the page: as appears from Collins’s letter to Richard Bentley of 6 November 1852 quoted below (*The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 80), folio 104 of the manuscript delivered in October 1852 included the text of vol. I, p. 143 of the printed text, and it is consistent that the present page, which contains the text of vol. I, pp. 133-37 of the printed text, should have been folio 102 of the same manuscript.

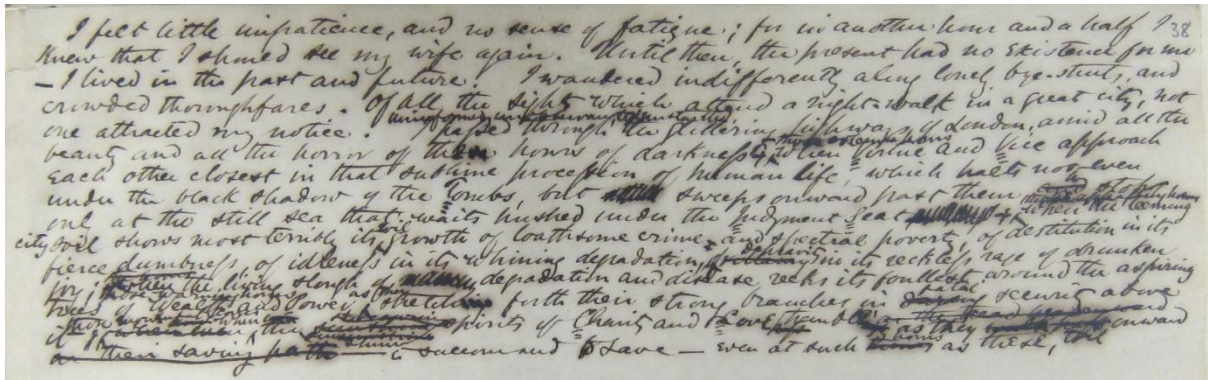


Figure 1.8: British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 38 (recto) (Image © British Library Board).

difficult passage (and one of which he cut by far the greater part when he revised the text in 1862).<sup>10</sup> This version – which itself shows the signs of much rewriting – reads:

I felt little impatience, and no sense of fatigue; for in another hour and a half I knew that I should see my wife again. Until then, the present had no existence for me – I lived in the past and future. I wandered indifferently along lonely bye-streets and crowded thoroughfares. Of all the sights which attend a night-walk in a great city, not one attracted my notice. Uninformed, unobservant, unstartled, I passed through the glittering highways of London, amid all the beauty and all the horrors of the hours of darkness – those solemn hours when Virtue and Vice approach each other closest in that sublime procession of human life which halts not even under the black shadow of the Tombs, but sweeps onward past them, to stop only at the still sea that waits hushed under the Judgment Seat; those appalling hours when the teeming city soil shows most terribly its evil growth of loathsome crime and spectral poverty, of destitution in its fierce dumbness, of idleness in its whining degradation, depravity in its reckless rage of drunken joy; those warning hours when the living slough of degradation and disease reeks its foulest around the aspiring trees of Wealth and Power as they stretch forth their strong branches in fatal security above it; those mournful hours when the spirits of Charity and Love tremble as they toil onward to succour and to save – even at such hours as these,

(Although this is close to the printed text (vol. II, pp. 135-36), it is apparent from the latter that Collins went on to make yet further alterations to this passage, either when copying it once again for the printer or when correcting the proofs.)

A further instance of the way in which Collins seems hardly ever to have gone back over what he had written in order to incorporate second thoughts or revisions, leaving all such

<sup>10</sup> See Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 126.

matters to a future draft, can be seen in the abrupt change, at a relatively late stage of composition, to the name of the narrator, and consequently to the title of the book. Folio 1<sup>r</sup> is headed ‘Lanreath’. (As is made explicit in the manuscript text – see, for example, folio 26<sup>r</sup>: ‘Married! Philip Lanreath, the inheritor of a name that had been written in the muster-roll of William the Conqueror – the son of the proudest man in England’ – but not in the printed text (vol. I, p. 292), ‘Lanreath’, the name of a small estate owned by his sister (folios 2<sup>r</sup> and 77<sup>r</sup>; vol. III, p. 231), is the pseudonymous surname that the narrator adopts in order to disguise the identity of his family.) ‘Lanreath’ is the working title of the novel throughout most of the manuscript. At folio 34<sup>v</sup> it appears with an epigraph from ‘The Author’s Apology for his Book’, John Bunyan’s preface to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*:

“May I not write in such a style as this?  
In such a method too, and yet not miss  
Mine end – thy good? Why may it not be done?  
Dark clouds bring waters, when the bright bring none.”

(Although Collins did not in the event use this – or any – epigraph to *Basil*,<sup>11</sup> he was to echo both Bunyan’s question and his tone, aptly described by John Bowen as ‘simultaneously aggressive and defensive’,<sup>12</sup> in the Letter of Dedication to Charles James Ward that prefaces the printed text. Seeking on the eve of publication to explain ‘the manner in which the moral purpose of the following pages is worked out’, Collins wrote that

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition—nobody can assert that such scenes are either useless or immoral in their effect on the reader, when they are turned to a plainly and purely moral purpose. If I am asked why I have written certain scenes in this book, my answer is to be found in the universally-accepted truth which the preceding words

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<sup>11</sup> Significantly, however, Collins used the same lines by Bunyan eighteen years later as the epigraph to *Man and Wife* (1870), which was not only the first (and only one) of his novels to bear an epigraph but also, as he acknowledged in the preface, the first to be explicitly didactic in intent:

The Story here offered to the reader differs in one respect from the stories which have preceded it by the same hand. This time the fiction is founded on facts, and aspires to afford what help it may towards hastening the reform of certain abuses which have been too long suffered to exist among us unchecked (Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, ed. Norman Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 5).

<sup>12</sup> John Bowen, ‘The Man in White: Wilkie Collins’s Styles’, in *On Style in Victorian Fiction*, ed. Daniel Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 172-90 (p. 179).

express. [...] In deriving the moral lesson which the following pages contain, from those examples of error and crime which would most strikingly and naturally teach it, I determined to do justice to the honesty of my object by speaking out. In drawing the two characters, whose actions bring about the darker scenes of my story, I did not forget that it was my duty [...] to put them to a good moral use [...].

To those persons who dissent from the broad principle here adverted to; who deny that it is the novelist's vocation to do more than merely amuse them; who shrink from all honest and serious reference, in books, to subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere; [...]—to those persons, I should consider it loss of time, and worse, to offer any further explanation of my motives, than the sufficient explanation which I have given already. I do not address myself to them in this book, and shall never think of addressing myself to them in any other (vol. I, pp. xvii-xx).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Collins was subsequently to restate and re-emphasise that defiant tone, both privately and publicly. He wrote to a correspondent in early 1853 that *Basil*

has been vehemently objected to as immoral (!) by some of those virtuously inflammable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times who are gifted with particularly sharp noses for smelling out supposititious [*sic*] filth in particularly unlikely places. As I have never written for these people and never will, then their condemnation is infinitely more acceptable than their approval

(Wilkie Collins, letter to F. O. Ward, 5 March 1853: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 83), and he repeated the substance of what he had written in the Letter of Dedication, including the assertion that his novel served 'a plainly and purely moral purpose', in the much shortened version of it that appeared in the revised edition of *Basil* published in 1862:

Those words formed part of the original introduction to this novel. I wrote them nearly ten years since; and what I said then, I say now.

'Basil' was the second work of fiction which I produced. On its appearance, it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy, as distinguished from false—I allowed the prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt. I knew that 'Basil' had nothing to fear from pure-minded readers; and I left these pages to stand or fall on such merits as they possessed. Slowly and surely, my story forced its way through all adverse criticism, to a place in the public favour which it has never lost since

(Collins, *Basil*, ed. Goldman, p. 6). Indeed, Collins was still asserting that *Basil* was 'undertaken with a pure purpose' as late as 1880, when he wrote in the dedicatory preface to *Jezebel's Daughter* that although his previous novel, *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), had offended the susceptibilities of 'a narrow-minded minority of readers, and [...] the critics who flatter them',

I respect my art far too sincerely to permit limits to be wantonly assigned to it, which are imposed in no other civilised country on the face of the earth. When my work is undertaken with a pure purpose, I claim the same liberty which is accorded to a writer in a newspaper, or to a clergyman in a pulpit; knowing, by previous experience, that the increase of readers and the lapse of time will assuredly do me justice, if I have only written well enough to deserve it.

[...] I remember what the nasty posterity of Tartuffe, in this country, said of 'Basil,' of 'Armada,' of 'The New Magdalen,' and I know that the wholesome audience of the nation at large has done liberal justice to those books

(Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, pp. 3-4). In the circumstances, it is not possible to accept the truth of the story circulated after his death that

Mr. Collins was not long in perceiving and repenting of the errors of taste exhibited in ["Basil"]. He was accustomed to buy up and destroy a copy of the three volume edition if it came in his way, and when, years afterwards, he prepared an edition in one volume for the press the work was subjected to a laborious and, we may add, a by no means superfluous purification

('The Late Mr. Wilkie Collins', *The Daily News*, no. 13562 (September 24 1889), p. 6), or that the first edition of *Basil* was 'suppressed practically' by its author ([Meredith White Townsend], 'Wilkie Collins', *The Spectator*, vol. 63, no. 3196 (September 28 1889), pp. 395-96; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 264).

‘Lanreath’ appears as the title again at folio 48<sup>v</sup>, with the same epigraph, and this time with the subtitle ‘The Cloud on the Household’, a phrase whose appropriateness for that purpose seems to have struck Collins as he wrote it at folio 48<sup>r</sup> (vol. II, p. 227 of the printed text): ‘For a long year past, there had been a Cloud on the Household – it was at its darkest and its blackest, to day [*sic*]’. Then at folio 72<sup>v</sup> there appears a new title, ‘Basil; or The Cloud On The Household’, with no epigraph. The new title reflects a change in the name of the narrator; previously known as ‘Philip’ (or – to his brother Ralph: see folios 64<sup>r</sup> and 65<sup>r</sup> – ‘Phil’), from this point onwards he becomes ‘Basil’. The abruptness of the change can be seen in the contrast between folios 73<sup>r</sup> (vol. III, pp. 180-81 of the printed text), where Margaret in her dying delirium calls her husband ‘Philip’, and 74<sup>r</sup> (vol. III, p. 189), where in her very last words she addresses him as ‘Basil’. Thereafter, while the title remained ‘Basil’, Collins experimented with a number of alternative subtitles. At folio 84<sup>v</sup> he wrote ‘Basil; or Pages from the Story of a Young Man’s Life’ twice, with varying capitalisation, while at folio 86<sup>v</sup>, on the back of the last page of the manuscript, he set out three possible titles: ‘Basil; A Young Man’s Confession’; ‘Basil; or Scenes From The History Of A Young Man’s Life’; ‘Basil; or The Love-Secret’. (As has been seen from the contract for publication, the title that Collins eventually settled on was ‘Basil; or passages from the life of a young man’; like the division of the work into three volumes rather than two, the late change to ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’ was in all probability determined by Richard Bentley, who had published two novels with the same subtitle – Baroness Jemima von Tautphoeus’s *The Initials. A Story of Modern Life* (1850) and Anne Hamilton Plomer’s *Kate Devereux: A Story of Modern Life* (1851) – in the previous two years.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not he chose it, however,

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Altick observes that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the historical romance – such as *Iolani* and *Antonina*, Collins’s own first attempts at fiction – was out of favour, and the ‘tale of the times’ was in the ascendancy to the extent that ‘a novel was virtually assumed to be a story of the present day’ (Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 38). That was reflected in the subtitles of a significant proportion of contemporary novels: at a time

Bentley seems to have had some difficulty remembering exactly what title had in fact been chosen: not only did the review of *Basil* that was published in *Bentley's Miscellany* at the beginning of December 1852, two weeks after the novel went on sale, refer to it as 'Basil: A Story of the Day'<sup>15</sup> – another favourite subtitle of Bentley's, having recently been affixed by him to Lady Charlotte Maria Pepys's *Lady Avice* (1851) and Sir Henry Drummond Wolff's *Blondelle* (1852) – but so did the publisher's advertisements in the press in the first two weeks of that month.)<sup>16</sup>

Examination of the manuscript text discloses many other differences between it and the printed text. Some changes appear relatively unimportant: Mannion's age is given as fifty in the manuscript text (folios 21<sup>r</sup>; 28<sup>r</sup>) and as forty in the printed text (vol. I, p. 224; vol. II, p. 2); Margaret's aunt's house is on the eastern side of the Edgeware Road in the manuscript text (folio 39<sup>r</sup>) and on the western side in the printed text (vol. II, p. 133); Basil attacks Mannion in '— Street' in the manuscript text (folio 45<sup>r</sup>) and in '— Square' in the printed text (vol. II, p. 194); Mr Sherwin's first name is Joseph in the manuscript text (folio 46<sup>r</sup>) and Stephen in the printed text (vol. II, p. 207). In John Bernard's exposition of the pathology of typhus (vol. III, pp. 149-50 of the printed text, quoted in the Introduction), Collins seems to

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when fewer than a hundred new works of prose fiction were published each year (see David Masson, *British Novelists and their Styles: Being a Critical Sketch of the History of British Prose Fiction* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1859), p. 212), the years 1851 and 1852 saw the publication of not only *Kate Devereux* and *Basil* but also *Stuart of Dunleath. A Story of Modern Times* by The Hon. Mrs Norton (1851), *The Dreamer and the Worker. A Story of the Present Time* by R. H. Horne (1851), *The Daughter of Night: A Story of the Present Time* by S. W. Fullom (1851), *Lady Avice. A Story of the Day* (1851), *Alfred Lennox; or, Puseyism Unveiled. A Tale for the Times* (1851), *Woman's Trials; or, Tales and Sketches from the Life Around Us* by T. S. Arthur (1851), *Milton Davenant, A Tale of the Times We Live In* by James Bandinel (1852), *Fiction but not Falsehood. A Tale of the Times* (1852), *Blondelle. A Story of the Day* (1852), and *Hutspot. A Tale for the Nineteenth Century* by Charles Francis Trower (1852).

<sup>15</sup> See [John William Kaye], "Esmond" and "Basil", *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 32 (December 1852), pp. 576-86 (p. 576).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *The Athenæum*, no. 1310 (December 4 1852), p. 1318, and no. 1311 (December 11 1852), p. 1369; *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1872 (December 4 1852), p. 896, and no. 1873 (December 11 1852), p. 899; Supplement to *The Spectator*, vol. 25, no. 1275 (December 4 1852), p. 8, and *The Spectator*, vol. 25, no. 1276 (December 11 1852), p. 1194.

have thought twice about inflicting too much medical detail on the reader, and deleted a reference to ‘the constitutional liability to infection at that moment’ being ‘what we term the nidus for the reception of the infection’ (folio 70<sup>r</sup> of the manuscript text). More significantly, although the house in which Mannion and Margaret deceive Basil is located in ‘a very lonely place’ in both the manuscript text (folio 40<sup>r</sup>) and the printed text (vol. II, p. 142), the manuscript text does not describe it as ‘a colony of half-finished streets, and half-inhabited houses’; it must have occurred to Collins at a later stage that the house could thereby be associated with North Villa, itself situated amid ‘Unfinished streets, unfinished crescents, unfinished squares, unfinished shops, unfinished gardens’ in both the manuscript text (folio 12<sup>r</sup>) and the printed text (vol. I, p. 120). Nor is there any reference in the manuscript text to the house being ‘in the neighbourhood of a great railway station’, or to Basil hearing ‘the fierce scream of the whistle, and the heaving, heavy throb of the engine starting on its journey’ (vol. II, p. 142 of the printed text); Collins may have added these details in order to add an air of specificity and thus enhance the apparent realism of his narrative. He wrote in the prefatory Letter of Dedication that

[I]n certain parts of this book where I have attempted to excite the suspense or pity of the reader, I have admitted as perfectly fit accessories to the scene the most ordinary street-sounds that could be heard, and the most ordinary street-events that could occur, at the time and in the place represented—believing that by adding to truth, they were adding to tragedy—adding by all the force of fair contrast—adding as no artifices of mere writing possibly could add, let them be ever so cunningly introduced, by ever so crafty a hand (vol. I, pp. xii-xiii),

and contemporary reviewers attested to the success of his attempt: ‘The admixture of such trivial incidents as belong to every-day life in its most modern aspect, far from detracting from the story’s impressive pathos, contributes to give it a further semblance of reality’.<sup>17</sup> (A further alteration to this passage was insisted on by Richard Bentley, who regarded the house as all too easily identifiable as a brothel. Collins originally wrote (folio 40<sup>r</sup>):

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Basil: A Story of Modern Life’, *The Globe*, no. 16965 (November 25 1852), p. 1.

I crossed the lane and knocked at the door of the house. It was opened by a girl. She was humming the tune of a popular street ballad as she admitted me; but the moment the light of a lamp in the passage fell on my face, she stopped. I saw her start, tremble a little, and turn quite pale as we looked at each other. I had intended to ask her who lived in the house but the mere sight of her made the question needless.

The girl subsequently returns a sovereign that Basil has given her with the words “I won’t have it – I’m afraid it’s the price of blood. [...] I’m bad enough but I won’t take the price of blood.” In the printed text (vol. II, pp. 143-44), the ‘house’ becomes a ‘hotel’ – and the ‘strange house’ into which Mr Sherwin later says Mannion lured his ‘unsuspecting child’ (folio 46<sup>r</sup>) becomes ‘some hotel’ (vol. II, p. 202) – and the ‘girl’ ‘a waiter—a mere lad’; Collins wrote to Bentley on 6 November 1852:

I send you Volume 1 – now at last ready for press. As I have managed the alteration now, I think the difficulty in the last chapter is got over altogether. If you will look at Folio 104, you will see that I have only mentioned “the Hotel” as a “deserted, dreary-looking building.”<sup>18</sup>

Other changes are more extensive. The conversation between Basil and the tradesman’s boy who tells him that Margaret is the daughter of a linen-draper, reported in indirect speech in the printed text (vol. I, pp. 126-27), was originally written in the form of a facetious dialogue replete with Cockney slang (folio 8<sup>v</sup>):<sup>19</sup>

Do you know the family living in that house?  
Ca’nt say they’ve invited me to tea yet –’spose they waits for me to begin the civilities – It’s no use a lookin at the ’ouse like that Sir – it ain’t on fire and it von’t come down cos you’ve got your eye on it.

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<sup>18</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 6 November 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 80. The change did not deceive the reviewers: *The Observer*’s summary of the plot described how Basil ‘succeeded in tracking [Margaret and Mannion] into a brothel, entered the house, and heard with his own ears sufficient to convince him of his wife’s perfidy, the head clerk’s treachery, and his own shame’ (‘Mr. Collins’s “Basil”’, *The Observer*, January 3 1853, p. 6), and *The Age* condemned the novel on the ground that it ‘brings the heroine into a brothel as a leading incident’ (‘*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*’, *The Age*, no. 32 (January 8 1853), p. 6).

<sup>19</sup> Words and phrases that look like fragments of this dialogue (‘Can’t say they’ve hast me to tea yet – praps they waits for me to begin when I git in my / Vitness sworn in and ready – please to proceed / Stands tall & she dresses swell you know / Her other names / Alive? / They was yesterday – Cook told us master’s had the boil / The what / The boil in his stummick you know – yeller in the face – taste of coppers – Missus looked doughy last time [*illegible*] praps she’s for the boil too – who knows?’) appear in the appropriate point in the narrative at folio 12<sup>v</sup>, introduced by a sentence that does not appear in the printed text (vol. I, p. 126): ‘The boy’s big [*illegible*] eyes twinkled in the anticipated triumph of his own slang as I addressed him.’ It seems that at this point Collins did no more than jot down notes for the proposed dialogue, leaving its development to later; when he did develop it, he did so on the back of an earlier page of the manuscript, apparently chosen at random.

I mean do you know anything about the family  
 Yes Sir – pay their bills reglar and don't give us Christmas boxes  
 Do you see this shilling?  
 I sees it and wants it  
 Well you shall have it – if you will answer the questions I ask you  
 Vait a bit Sir (turning his tray on its side and making a seat of it) – Now then –  
 Vitness ready My Lord and jury  
 What is the name of the young lady who lives in that house  
 The Stunner  
 What!  
 The Stunner – us boys calls her the Stunner, 'cos she is a stunner  
 Her other names!  
 Are her father and mother alive?  
 Cook told me he's had the boil.  
 Q: Boil?  
 A: Yes, the boil in his stummick  
 Q: Ah, you mean bile. Well?  
 A: She looks a leetle doughy but the doctor's paid – and the undertaker do'nt seem  
 coming – and we can't ask the housemaid 'ow they getting on 'cos she's upstairs now  
 clearing away the slops –  
 Do you know what the gentleman's calling is –  
 Wery loud – 'specially when he catches us throwin' stones near the green 'us – He  
 comes out so sudden on us and bawls so loud that we calls him Slap-Bang-Vlop!  
 What's his business  
 Wery pretty business – large shop in —— Street  
 Shop!  
 Yes – vith double Wenetian blind steam ingine brass shutters – number — left hand  
 side goin to the City – when you wants to buy a satin gown for the young woman you  
 keeps company with go there for it – just tell 'em my name & they'll give you tick  
 I gave the boy the shilling and walked away. I had heard enough. I had heard too  
 much.

(Collins was well advised not to retain this passage; the flippant tones of this new voice would have intruded jarringly upon the obsessive introspection of Basil's narrative in the same way as do the complaints of the Sherwins' cook about the fuss her “austerious” master makes about his servants' caps and ribbons (vol. I, p. 168).) Other significant changes between the manuscript text and the printed text include additions and amendments to Basil's instructions in the last of the Letters in Conclusion as to how his book is to be prepared for publication (folio 84<sup>r</sup> of the manuscript text; vol. III, pp. 291-92 of the printed text), whose

importance is discussed in chapter 4 below. Most notably, chapter I of volume 1 of the manuscript text, at folio 1<sup>r</sup> (transcribed in the Appendix), is substantially different to the (considerably shorter) chapter I of Part I of the printed text (vol. I, pp. 25-29). Indeed, with the exception of the last paragraph, the substance of which appears at vol. III, p. 223 of the printed text as noted above, only one sentence of folio 1<sup>r</sup> ('I once knew of some man who left directions in his will that his body should be anatomised as an offering of [*sic*] science – so, I leave my heart in these pages to be anatomised as an offering to human nature') found its way into the printed text (vol. I, p. 26).

William Baker, who is the only previous scholar to have written in any detail about the manuscript of *Basil*, argues that the rewriting of the first chapter 'show[s] Wilkie Collins the writer struggling with his chosen artistic form', and that a comparison of the manuscript text with the printed text 'reveal[s] that at times Wilkie Collins seems to be writing a totally different novel from the one that emerges as the printed *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*'; characterising chapter I of volume 1 of the manuscript text as 'melodramatic, replete with Biblical echoes, and solipsistic', he suggests that the original opening of the novel was 'too stark, too obsessive and had to be revised'.<sup>20</sup> Baker considerably overstates his case. While chapter I of Part I of the printed text omits the Biblical echo of 'Out of the Darkness that was upon the face of the deep came the Light of the first morning', it is little, if any, less melodramatic or solipsistic in tone than chapter I of volume 1 of the manuscript text. Both versions can fairly be described as 'stark' and 'obsessive'; in both an overwrought 23-year-old narrator is about to begin writing an account of some unspecified calamity that has befallen him, a calamity that has resulted in his banishment from home and his hiding in a

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<sup>20</sup> William Baker, 'Wilkie Collins's *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*: An Author's Search for an Appropriate Form', in *Form and Feeling in Modern Literature: Essays in Honour of Barbara Hardy*, ed. William Baker with Isobel Armstrong (London: Legenda, 2013), pp. 29-42 (pp. 31-32; 36).

small fishing village on the Cornish coast. In each case the narrator emphasises his exile and his solitude: in the manuscript text he describes himself as ‘friendless’, ‘a stranger among my fellow creatures’; in the printed text he begins writing on his birthday, ‘the first new year of my life, which has not been greeted by a single kind word, or a single loving wish’ (vol. I, p. 28). It is true that the manuscript text places more emphasis on the narrator’s sense of defilement and guilt, and the printed text on the threat posed by a lurking enemy.

Nonetheless, it is surely an exaggeration to say that the former is ‘totally different’ from the latter.

Far from revealing that Collins was writing ‘a totally different novel’, the manuscript in fact demonstrates the extent to which the work that was eventually published was strikingly similar to the first draft. Structurally, they are identical: with the exception of chapter II of volume 1, which was transposed to the Journal as noted above, the chapters of the manuscript text correspond exactly to the chapters of the printed text. As regards the plot, it is clear that Collins had worked out the details of his story before he began to write the first draft. Indeed, there is only one point at which it appears from the manuscript text that he may not have planned the plot in every respect. At folio 6<sup>r</sup>, the narrator concludes his long account of his brother Ralph in these terms:

He has given up his post at the Embassy and is travelling quietly in Italy, with no other companion than the fair friend who is working his reform.

When he will return to England – whether he will ever become the high-minded high-principled country gentleman that my father has always desired to see him, it is useless for me to guess. On the domains which he will one day inherit, I shall never set foot again – in the halls where he will one day sit as master, I shall never more be sheltered. For me, such enquiries as these have no purpose or interest now. I have sketched my brother’s character as I once knew and shall probably never have another opportunity of altering or completing the outline.

It seems that Collins did not at this early stage envisage the role played by Ralph in the events that follow Basil’s discovery of Mannion’s and Margaret’s conspiracy against him. In the

printed text, Ralph's giving up of his post at the embassy is followed by

Since that, he has returned to England; has devoted himself to collecting snuff-boxes and learning the violin; and is now living quietly in the suburbs of London, still under the inspection of the resolute female missionary who first worked his reform.

Whether he will ever become the high-minded, high-principled country gentleman, that my father has always desired to see him, it is useless for me to guess. On the domains which he is to inherit, I shall perhaps never set foot again: in the halls where he will one day preside as master, I shall never more be sheltered. Let me now quit the subject of my elder brother (vol. I, p. 69).<sup>21</sup>

The manuscript not only indicates the manner in which Collins wrote *Basil*; it also indicates precisely when he wrote it. As was noted above, folio 8<sup>v</sup> sets out a detailed programme of future work for the two weeks beginning 'August 18 Monday'. Collins's identification of August 18 as a Monday establishes that the year in which that note was written was 1851. There are other indications in the manuscript that *Basil* was begun in the summer of 1851, and that Collins's generally authoritative biographer Catherine Peters is wrong to say that he 'had no time to start a new novel in 1851', and started *Basil* '[a]t the beginning of 1852'.<sup>22</sup> (Other biographers are equally wrong to state that *Basil* took Collins two or even three years to write, notwithstanding that he himself said in the Letter of Dedication that the book had been 'a dear and an absorbing employment' for no more than 'many months' (vol. I, p.

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<sup>21</sup> It is conceivable that Collins also did not envisage from the outset that the novel would end with Basil living in rural solitude with his unmarried sister Clara. In two passages near the beginning of the manuscript text, neither of which appears in the printed text, Basil talks of Clara's marriage as an event likely to occur. At folio 9<sup>r</sup> (transcribed in the Appendix), after a paragraph describing the help Clara gives him with the novel he is writing by making extracts from books of reference (vol. I, pp. 91-92 of the printed text), he describes Clara's rejection of a proposal of marriage, '(about the fifth or sixth she has had up to this time)', from 'a young baronet with forty thousand a year', and at folio 16<sup>v</sup>, opposite a passage describing his eagerness to get to Hollyoake Square for his first interview with Margaret and his consequent indifference to Clara's anxiety about him (vol. I, p. 176 of the printed text), he laments that he 'had hitherto only thought of my sister's (possible) marriage – as a necessary calamity which would mournfully alter our relations with each other – now I wished her married to take off her attention from me – miserable selfishness of love!'

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991), pp. 102; 111. Peters's error is repeated by Lillian Nayder, *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Twayne, 1997), p. 29 ('Collins began writing *Basil* in January 1852, soon after completing *Mr. Wray's Cash Box*') and Melisa Klimaszewski, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Hesperus Press, 2011), p. 38 (in September 1852 Collins completed *Basil*, which 'he had been working on intermittently since early in the year').

xxi).)<sup>23</sup> When folio 3<sup>v</sup> is turned upside down, there is written at the top of the page

(1)

Private Picture Galleries of England.

No. 2. Northumberland House and Syon House.

That was the title of an article by Collins published in *Bentley's Miscellany* at the beginning of August 1851,<sup>24</sup> the second in a series of three. The first in the series was published at the beginning of July 1851,<sup>25</sup> so that it is reasonable to assume that it was shortly thereafter that Collins began to make a fair copy of the second on the back of the third page of the manuscript of his new novel. The most convincing evidence for dating Collins's commencement of *Basil* to the summer of 1851, however, is provided by folio 17<sup>v</sup>, where there appears a passage that seems to have nothing to do with the text on the previous or following pages:

the English people on the contrary we expressly described that people as tolerating a government which misses such glorious opportunities for elevating the influence of England to the highest pinnacle in Europe and for establishing the progress of mankind beyond the power of absolutism to hinder it.

But these considerations do not apply to the Irish Exiles. Their case is that of men who have resorted – whether they had arms in their hands at the moment or not it little signifies – to open warfare against the government of the country they therefore incurred the penalty of defeat with its consequences and we hold that it is to assume a very mistaken position if a defeated combatant asks or even demands any sort of concession from the victor. We hold that even harshness forms no ground for complaint. It may form a ground for renewed resistance, where that is practicable it may be a motive to vengeance but under no circumstances can complaint be otherwise than a puerility under no circumstances can the vanquished ask concessions from the

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<sup>23</sup> Collins's most recent biographer, Andrew Lycett, writes that *Basil* took 'two years to reach [the] stage' where Collins could say that he had written 'The End' (Andrew Lycett, *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation* (London: Hutchinson, 2013), p. 102). Nuel Pharr Davis goes further, contending that *Basil* was 'worked out over a period of three years'. Davis divides the text into three, asserting that the first hundred pages, 'a sort of first-person throat-clearing introduction that intermixes autobiographical material with miscellaneous notes on modern life as seen from the street and the omnibus', 'probably represents fumbling work that Wilkie did in 1850 and 1851 before his association with Dickens', while 'there is reason to believe' that the remainder of volume I and volume II is 'the fruit of contact with Dickens and his inner circle' and was 'begun in the late fall of 1851', whereas 'The last volume [...] seems to have been done in the summer and fall of 1852 to fill out *Basil* to conventional three-decker length' (Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), pp. 120; 116).

<sup>24</sup> [W. Wilkie Collins], 'The Picture Galleries of England. Northumberland House, and Syon House', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 30 (August 1851), pp. 163-73.

<sup>25</sup> [W. Wilkie Collins], 'The Picture Galleries of England. The Earl of Ellesmere's Collection', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 30 (July 1851), pp. 78-87.

victor without courting indignity.

If we were to seek a parallel between the Austrianism of the Continent and the conduct of our own government, we should find it rather in the case of Ernest Jones and his fellow prisoners. We have not heard that M<sup>c</sup>Manus and his compatriots were subjected to any thing which could be called cruelty. Mitchell has expressly said that they were well treated Smith O'Brien repelled spontaneous offers of indulgence. The treatment of Mr Jones and his fellow prisoners was very different. It was a continuance of studied cruelty not the less

Previously unidentified – the anonymous author of the typed notes attached to the manuscript at some time after its acquisition by the British Museum in 1923 describes it only as ‘a passage from some political tract, mentioning Ireland’<sup>26</sup> – this is in fact a draft of part of an article that was published in *The Leader* on Saturday 19 July 1851.<sup>27</sup> Its appearance on the back of folio 17 of the manuscript of *Basil* demonstrates that the novel was well under way by that date. Indeed, it is reasonable to infer that Collins had completed folio 17<sup>r</sup> (whose text runs from “‘Well, Sir, that would make a difference, to be sure’” (vol. I, p. 172 of the printed text) to ‘I could have knelt down and kissed the ground she had trod on’ (vol. I, p. 184)) and had at least begun folio 18<sup>r</sup> by the time he wrote that article, which was presumably in the week beginning Monday 14 July 1851. If that is right, then it is plausible that Collins completed folio 18<sup>r</sup> by Saturday 19 July 1851. The bottom of that page marks a break point in the narrative, ending as it does with the words ‘It was still the first act only of the dark Drama of my early manhood – there were others to played out [*sic*], before the Retribution came’ (vol. I, p. 197 of the printed text). It is also slightly more than a third of the way through volume 1. In the light of the discussion above, it is not unduly speculative to identify the end of folio 18<sup>r</sup> with point 32, the point that the timetable at folio 8<sup>v</sup> shows that Collins had

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<sup>26</sup> British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio [ii].

<sup>27</sup> ‘No Peace’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 69 (July 19 1851), pp. 679-80 (p. 680). The identification of this article as by Collins makes it necessary to reconsider such generally accepted propositions as that Collins’s first contribution to *The Leader* was published on 27 September 1852 (see Kirk H. Beetz, ‘Wilkie Collins and The Leader’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 20-29 (p. 23); William Baker, *A Wilkie Collins Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 44) and that ‘In all probability, Collins never contributed to the political departments of the *Leader*’ (Graham Law and Andrew Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 50).

reached by Monday 18 August 1851, and to suggest that, having reached that point by Saturday 19 July 1851 – after perhaps only two to three weeks of writing – he then took a break from *Basil* to concentrate on writing for *The Leader* and also on his appearance in the final London performances of *Not So Bad as We Seem*, which took place on 21 and 28 July and 4 August 1851. It appears from folio 8<sup>v</sup> that Collins planned to spend two more weeks to get to point 60 and up to three weeks thereafter to complete volume 1, leaving volume 2 to be written in October and November. If he adhered to that timetable, then volume 1 may have taken between seven and eight weeks in all to write, and volume 2 much the same – perhaps fourteen or fifteen weeks in total.

In any event, the evidence that Collins began to write *Basil* in late June or early July 1851 seems conclusive. While there is no similarly conclusive evidence that he completed volume 1 by 20 September 1851 in accordance with his timetable, or that he wrote volume 2 immediately thereafter as planned, it seems very likely that he did. There is no indication on the face of the manuscript of any break in composition either between volume 1 and volume 2 or subsequently. Moreover, on Friday 28 November 1851 Collins wrote to Richard Bentley to offer him ‘a Christmas Story [...] a 5/- affair, running to about 130 pages – a sort of tragicomedy’ for which the idea had come to him that day and which he felt ‘pretty certain’ of getting done by Monday 15 December, for publication by 20 December.<sup>28</sup> Not only is it

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<sup>28</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 28 November 1851: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 72-73 (where it is wrongly dated 23 October 1851; the date is corrected in *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 52). Collins performed his undertaking to write the 33,000 or so words of *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* in just over a fortnight: he wrote to Bentley's office manager on 14 December 1851 that ‘I have arrived at the last chapter of Mr Wray's Cash-Box’ (Wilkie Collins, letter to J. T. Marsh, 14 December 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 53). Moreover, if Graham Law is right to suggest that Collins was the author of a comic short story published in *The Leader* on 20 December 1851 (see Graham Law, ‘*The New Dragon of Wantley: A Social Revelation*’, *A Lost Tale by Wilkie Collins, with further discussions of his contributions to The Leader* ([London]: The Wilkie Collins Society, 2007), he followed these labours by immediately writing more than 2,700 further words of fiction in a couple of days. It is unsurprising that Collins should have written to a friend on 22 December 1851 that he was ‘dead knocked up with hard work’ and forbidden by his doctor to write anything more just yet – ‘even letter-writing is too much for me just now’

perhaps unlikely that he would have embarked on that fresh project if the first draft of *Basil* remained unfinished, but the manuscript of *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box* (British Library, Add. MS 41060, folios 87-101) is written in the same cramped hand and on the same paper as the immediately preceding final pages of the manuscript of *Basil* with which it was apparently kept by Collins in his lifetime and with which it was sold at auction after his death.<sup>29</sup> The obvious inference is that those final pages of *Basil* had indeed been written by the end of November 1851.

Having completed the first draft in November 1851, Collins seems to have revised volume 1 of *Basil* at the beginning of March 1852,<sup>30</sup> and volume 2 between 10 and 16 September 1852. On 9 September 1852 he wrote to his mother from Dover, where he was staying with Charles Dickens, then writing *Bleak House*,

I shall get to work tomorrow and finish and correct my book in a week, I hope. If good ideas are as infectious as bad, the end of the novel – written in this house – ought to be the best part of it!<sup>31</sup>

Once again he complied with his own timetable; just under a week later, on 16 September 1852, he wrote to a friend that ‘Following the example of my host, I have been working hard since my arrival here; and have really finished my hitherto interminable book. Yesterday morning I wrote those last two welcome words “The End”’.<sup>32</sup>

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(Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 22 December 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 55).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Original Manuscripts, by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins’, Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge, 18 June 1890, lot 16.

<sup>30</sup> See Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 3 March 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 63-64 (p. 64) (‘At last, I have got my room in good order; and have taken up my new book in earnest. Vol: 1<sup>st</sup> is undergoing correction today’).

<sup>31</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Harriet Collins, 9 September 1852: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 16 September 1852: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 76-77 (p. 77); see also Wilkie Collins, letter to Charles Ward, 16 September 1852: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 90-91 (p. 90) (‘I have done the book – really done it, down to writing the memorable word [“End”]’).

The significance of the fact that *Basil* was to all intents and purposes written in the summer and autumn of 1851 is the subject of the next chapter.

**APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 1**  
**TRANSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MANUSCRIPT OF *BASIL***

**Folio 1<sup>r</sup>**

Lanreath  
Part First. In Cornwall.

July 18–

I

Alone! – at the age of twenty three alone in the world! I have but begun my life; and already I stand as a stranger among my fellow creatures – already see my onward pilgrimage traced out before me as a lonely pathway that runs by the side of a populous high road but never joins it. The task appointed to me is a hard one to fulfil. I have the weight of a heavy calamity to cast off, the stealthy poisons of bad remembrances to resist – the guilt of evil thoughts and evil acts to cleanse – and I must do this unaided – young and friendless though I am, I dare not expect sympathy or ask for help.

No! for atonement, for consolation, for hope, I must trust to myself. From the dross of my errors should spring the purity of my repentance; from the gloom of my affliction should arise the brightness of my better life. Should! – let me say shall! – let me neither falter nor despair. Out of the Darkness that was upon the face of the deep came the Light of the first morning.

What nobler occupation for heart and mind than this which I have set myself to perform? To trace my own way back, through all difficulty and danger, to the high place from which I am fallen after having sunk down at the threshold of Life, to rise and begin the journey anew – to grow courageous from long disaster – to know myself disgraced, deceived, dejected and yet not to lose hope and ambition for the future. Let me but have the life and strength to perform these duties; and I can meet the perils and trials that may yet be to come – meet them strong to bear and firm to resist.

I have taken refuge from guilt and persecution – from the anger and misery of others – from my own weakness and woe, in this remote corner of England, in this little fishing village on the Cornish coast. Perhaps, I ought, in regard to my own safety, to have gone on further – to have hidden myself securely in a foreign land. But when I went out homeless forever from my father's roof – when but one voice, a voice I may never hear again, spoke comfort to me and bid me farewell – when I remembered that my first, best, purest love had been turned into my curse and my shame – that the better joys and happier occupations of life were lost and gone to me, that the stain of foul passions was left on my soul and the lacerations of sharp suffering still bled and festered at my heart – when I felt all this, there grew within me a yearning towards my own country – a wild forlorn helpless attachment to the soil on which I had been born – the soil which I thought might be a nursing mother to me in my friendlessness and my grief, my loneliness and my danger. So I went on past town and village, moor and meadow while I hid myself for solace and security here among the hills of my native land – hid myself, as a child angered by contradiction, or affrighted by objects around it, hides its face in its mother's breast.

Here then, I remain to learn endurance and to conquer grief. But there is one obstacle –

within me – to that purification of my heart and that strengthening of my mind which it is now the last best object of my life to accomplish.

The remembrance of the calamity I have suffered never deserts me – it has not only darkened the whole current of my existence and changed every purpose for which it was once my conviction to live – it incessantly burns in upon my memory – all the smallest slightest circumstances connected with it are as present to me now, as when they first occurred – it burns my thoughts by day and inspires my dreams by night. If I walk forth upon the hill-tops and look abroad over the rolling sea, my mind even amid the grandest aspects of Nature is still occupied with the miserable and irrevocable Past. If I sit down to my books, my attention wanders away from the loftiest thoughts of others to my own bitter experiences. I have endeavoured to write myself; but whatever the subject on which I try my pen, the fatal influence of my own story more or less surely guides it. My mind is infected by the moral disease within me – the plague-spot fastens and expands. Is there no help no remedy against this?

I know of but one. It is to exhaust my recollections incessantly employing them for a time – by writing down the narrative of what has befallen me, true and in all its details. If I can force my mind by sheer hard work to wear itself out on this subject, I may yet hope to store it with higher and better reflections – the anguish which this effort will cause me must end by wearying my restless thoughts into repose – by emptying my full heart of all that was dross and polluted it. What confession is to the penitent the composition of these pages may be to me.

I may be morbid and weak – I may be wrong in my present convictions – but God help me I have no other choice than to follow them! Solitude I can bear – but inaction – or what is even worse the fruitless effort to be occupied – these are burdens too heavy for me. I must employ my mind – I must give it work and weary it into tranquillity and repose – or I shall lose my reason. I have tried hard to govern it; but in vain. I know no occupation that it is fit for but this that I propose to myself – and this I will at once begin.

It would be uncandid not to admit at the outset that I contemplate the publication of the narrative I am now about to write. After my death, I hope and believe that it will be printed. To some it will be a lesson – to others a study of human nature – to all it should be interesting for the simplest and the strongest reason – it is true. I once knew of some man who left directions in his will that his body should be anatomised as an offering of [*sic*] science – so, I leave my heart in these pages to be anatomised as an offering to human nature.

But before I occupy myself my Self [*sic*] with the past, it is fit that I should linger a moment over the present. A few words about this place of my repose, about the life that I now live in it will aptly [*illegible*] preface to my narrative. If I can [*illegible*] first for what I am now – I can more easily and freely proceed to the confession of what I was.

## **Folio 2<sup>r</sup> (part)**

### II

The little hamlet where my life has been passed for the last month is on the southern coast of Cornwall – not more than a few miles distant from the Lands End. The cottage I occupy has but two rooms. I have no furniture but my bed my table and my chair. Some half dozen fishermen and their families are my only neighbours. Not two months back I should have scrupled to kennel my dogs in such a place as I now inhabit – I should have spent as a [*illegible*] my pocket-money the [*illegible*] pittance on which I now exist.

When I first came here, my arrival produced both astonishment and suspicion. The primitive people could not reconcile my pale worn face with my youthful years – they looked on my loneliness on my wan face with superstitious eyes – the women and children had an awe of me at first, as of some unknown being who had come among them to waste away under a curse and die mysteriously and secretly among them. They waited day after day, when I was first installed in the cottage, to see my friends join me and none came – to see a letter sent me – and no letters arrived. When I paid them money for my new joinery they questioned the lawfulness and safety of receiving it. The fisherman's wife who prepares my food confessed to me but yesterday – good kind soul! with many contrite tears and much shame – that she had looked at my few books in my absence – to see if there were any strange magic characters in them – anything like the witchcraft which she had heard about in old Cornish legends.

All these particulars I have gathered from the fisherman's wife who prepares my food and who confessed to me with much contrition – good simple soul! that she had even looked among the few books in my absence to see whether they did not exhibit some startling supernatural peculiarities. Her sister had listened at my window late at night to be assured that I did not mutter quietly in a magic tongue – either to myself or – worse still! – to some familiar spirit who visited me. This superstitious curiosity is now wearing off among my poor neighbours. They are getting used to my solitary, studious, and (to them) inexplicable mode of existence. One or two little services of kindness that I have been enabled to render to their children have worked wonders in my favour. I am pitied now, rather than distrusted. Offers have been made to go some distance away, and send for the doctor or the clergyman to do me good. When the results of the fishing are abundant a little present is often made to me. Yesterday, when I went out in the morning, I found some gulls' eggs placed outside my window. They had been placed there by some of the children, as an ornament for my cottage – the only ornament they had to give, the only ornament they had ever heard of.

Even my long walks by myself, the grief and despondency that I cannot as yet always subdue or conceal, no longer excite either suspicion or surprise. I can go out with my Bible or my Shakespeare in my hand and direct my steps up the ravine in which our hamlet is situated towards the old grey stone church that stands solitary on the hill-top surrounded by the lonesome moor. If any children happen to be playing among the scattered mossy tombstones they do not start and run away when they see me sitting on the coffin-stone at the entrance of the churchyard, or wandering around the solid granite tower reared by hands that have mouldered into dust centuries ago. My approach is no evil omen now for my little neighbours. They look up at me for a moment with bright smiles, and then go on with their game.

From the churchyard I look down the ravine on fine days towards the sea. Mighty piles of granite soar above the fishermen's cottages on each side. The little strip of white sand beach which they shut in glows pure in the sunlight – the inland stream that trickles down the bed of the rocks sparkles at places like a stream of silver fire – the round white clouds with their violet shadows and their bright wavy edges tower up and roll on majestically all above me. The cries of the sea-birds, the endless dirging murmur of the surf, the far faint music of the wind among the ocean caverns, fall now together now separately on my ear. Nature's voice and Nature's beauty – God's soothing and purifying angels of the soul – speak to me tenderly at such times as these of that last long end of mortal hope which is the bright beginning of eternal joy!

Oh my heart! my heart! – I can feel it sometimes writhing and heaving within me, when I pause and rest at sunset at the granite rocks that are scattered over the inland moor, when the [illegible] tranquillity is awful in the wide solitude and bids me think in the loneliness of all I

have suffered, of all that I may yet have to bear! When I rise again, and walk homeward, young as I am the graves have a welcome and a promise for me as I pass through the darkening churchyard.

It is worse with me, when the rain and wind and sea arise together, and sheltered among the caverns at the side of the precipice, I look out upon the leaping waves and the wild driving spray. Then the menace of a danger that hangs over my head – then the threat of a deadly enemy vowed to pursue me to ruin madness death assails me in all its horror. I see the dim ghastly personification of a fatality that is watching me in the strange shapes of the mist that shrouds the sky and moves and whirls and brightens and darkens in a weird glory of its own over the wide heaving ocean. Then, the winds growling and thundering behind me in the hollows of the cave have a voice of woe and warning to my ear – the shock of the breakers on the rocks howls upon me with a sound of judgment – Lament! Thou hast flown from the doom that followed thee – and lo, go where thou wilt now, thou shalt find it evermore in thy front!

These are my thoughts; but they cannot quell me. I may lose hope; but never patience – despair may overwhelm me; but his sister Fury guilt shall never follow in his track.

My outward life in this seclusion is a blank – a few lines may tell it. In the morning I am always near my cottage content to watch the toils and cares and recreations of the little community among whom I live. In the afternoon I extend my wanderings – in what direction I care not so long as I can weary my mind into comparative oblivion, by wearing my body into absolute fatigue. In the evening when I cannot sleep, I read. When I can do neither, when late at night darkness and wakefulness have their vague terrors for me, as if I was a child again, then I think and suffer till the morning light.

Is this inaction a criminal inaction – is it a morbid capitulation of the citadel of the heart at the first summons of despondency and suffering? Wait until my story is told; and then say, could you do otherwise?

It is eight o'clock, the morning sun shines out auspiciously from banks of purple rainy clouds, the fishermen are spreading their nets to dry on the lower declivities of the rocks, the children are playing about the boats drawn up on the beach – the sea breeze blows fresh and pure towards the shore – all objects are bright to look upon, all sounds are pleasant to hear, as I open my paper and begin my narrative.

### **Folio 9<sup>r</sup> (part)**

Thus she persists in undertaking the whole department of extracts and performs the duty admirably – performs it in spite of all interruptions from visitors and of all the other engagements that she is obliged to accept. Only on one occasion does she fail. Then, a visitor is announced in the person of a young baronet with forty thousand a year. Very good-looking, very good-tempered and very stupid – the baronet contrives to lure my unsuspecting sister into a conservatory, and then assails her suddenly and strenuously with an offer of marriage (about the fifth or sixth she has had up to this time)[.] I hear the baronet depart in a great hurry and see how Clara enters my room again to go on with her writing, looking nervous and discomposed and trying to laugh it off but all in vain. She is afraid that she has not properly rejected her suitor – that she has been too composed to make him comprehend how grateful she was for the honour he had proposed to confer on her – and she had not refused it so gently and yet so plainly, as she had wished. Her doubts end by making her hand tremble so that is unable [*sic*] to write a word, and is obliged to leave me for the first time to complete

what she has done.

### **Folio 16<sup>v</sup> (part)**

Vain delusion to call a passion generous which inevitably and invariably demands the sacrifice of other affections purer though less powerful than itself. Does it not? Do the claims of dear kindred and [*illegible*] speak to you in the same voice after marriage, that they spoke in before – are your good old friendships the same friendships, after you are married that they were before? No! Some of our devotions come to us with a breath of Eden still lingering about them; but the devotion of love, love the passion, has ever lingering about it a taint of the air on this side Paradise [*sic*] in which it first grew – an earthly shadow ever cast on it by the physical instinct in which deify and idealize it as we may, it takes its rise. Leave fathers and mothers and brethren and cleave to your wife is a commandment divine in its source – and a [*illegible*] commandment therefore – but how many hearts have been withered and broken in the keeping of it! Am I soured by my own evil experience in writing thus? I remember a girl we once knew – who fell in love with an officer at a ball. He was in every respect an excellent match – but the girl's father was growing old – and he objected to it for one reason – the officer was about to return to India to remain, as his military interests required, for a long period of years. The father could not hope ever to see the daughter again, in the course of nature. She was his idol – his pride. But she would marry – she fell ill – took to her bed in despair – and she was married – and went away. And her father never held up his head again – he drooped – his character altered completely. Who pitied or understood him? He could not complain – the marriage was excellent. His daughter had exercised a natural right and instinct, which her children would exercise in their turn – yes – but don't exalt this instinct – this passion – this devotion, above all others – it is beneath many in this world – it is counted as nothing in the next.

### **Folio 31<sup>r</sup> (part)**

Can that be fairly called a generous passion, which inevitably and invariably demands the sacrifice of other affections purer than itself? Does it not? Let us take – the finest love in its purest development as a passion – marriage – do the claims of near and dear kindred speak to you in the same voice after marriage that they did before? Are your old friendships of boyhood and youth, the same friendships after marriage that they were before? I remember a girl whom I once knew something of – a good amiable girl – who fell in love with an officer of our Indian army at a ball. He was in every respect what is called an excellent match – but the girl's father made one objection to the marriage – the officer's military interests required him to return to India, and remain there for a long period of years. If his daughter married the man of her choice, under these circumstances, her father could not hope in the course of Nature ever to see her again. She was his only daughter; and he loved and worshipped her as fatherly devotion will. His refusal, however, so affected her that she fell ill – he gave way – it was the old story of the sacrifice of the parent for the child. In six weeks she was married and had sailed for India. Her father never held up his head after it – it broke him down heart and mind. Who understood him, who sympathised with him? What would the world say[?] Her marriage was a good one – his daughter had exercised a natural right – had given way to a natural instinct. Yes; but do not exalt this instinct – a physical instinct in its essence, however you may deify it – No.

## **CHAPTER 2: 'EVERYTHING WAS OPPRESSIVELY NEW'**

This chapter considers some of the ways in which *Basil* engages with specific aesthetic and cultural issues of the summer and autumn of 1851 when it was written, in particular Pre-Raphaelitism and the Great Exhibition. It is argued that Collins's text reflects contemporary debates, prompted by the Great Exhibition, about good and bad taste in domestic furnishings, not least the view held by those most closely associated with the promotion and organisation of the Exhibition that bad taste was equivalent to bad morals. That discussion paves the way for the argument of the chapter that follows, that when he has Basil paint verbal portraits of certain characters in the novel Collins is alluding to a further contemporary aesthetic issue, a style of portraiture that was being advocated and practised at the time by members of his immediate social circle.

The extent to which *Basil* is rooted in the moment of its composition is revealed by the fact that although Basil's misfortunes are said in the last of the Letters in Conclusion to have occurred more than nine years earlier – that is, in the early 1840s – the event with which they begin, his first sighting of Margaret in an omnibus, could not have taken place at any time prior to 1850 at the earliest. That first sighting occurs after Basil visits his father's bankers in the City of London to receive his quarter's allowance of pocket-money; as he debates how to travel home, 'an omnibus passed me, going westward' (vol. I, pp. 95-96), and he decides on impulse to get in. After Margaret and her companion get in, Basil remains on board until they get out 'nearly [...] at the last point to which the omnibus would take us' (vol. I, p. 119). From there, they walk for a quarter of an hour (vol. I, p. 130) until they reach 'a suburb of new houses, intermingled with wretched patches of waste ground, half built over' and come at last to Hollyoake Square, 'unfinished like everything else in the neighbourhood' (vol. I, pp. 120-

21). On leaving the square, Basil walks ‘into the Regent’s Park, the northern portion of which was close at hand’ (vol. I, p. 121).

It is clear from this description, and particularly from the proximity of Regent’s Park, that Collins imagined Hollyoake Square to be situated in the northern part of St John’s Wood, described by one observer in 1853 as a ‘district north-west of London which lies between the Regent’s Park and Maida Hill’ that was ‘so much enlarging in the northern direction, that the definition of its locality will shortly be more accurate when stated as lying between Haverstock Hill and Kilburn’; it was said to be mostly inhabited by ‘the opulent and industrious professional men and tradesmen of London’ – just like Mr Sherwin, said by Mannion to be ““among the top dignitaries of [his] trade”” (vol. III, p. 34) – ‘who wisely make it their place of retreat from the showy fashionable or dingy trading resorts of the great metropolis’.<sup>1</sup> More precisely, Hollyoake Square lies to one side of Avenue Road (which must be the ‘long, suburban road’ (vol. II, p. 268) off which Basil turns into the square when he walks to North Villa for the very last time), somewhere in the area bounded by Adelaide Road, just south of Swiss Cottage, to the north and Queen’s Road, St John’s Wood to the

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Cox, *The Landlord and Tenant’s Guide: A Compendium of Information Upon the Procuring, Occupying and Disposing of Estates and Houses, and Many Collateral Subjects; with a Gazetteer of Great Britain* (London: The Author, [1853]), p. 231.

south (figure 2.1).<sup>2</sup> But that part of St John's Wood was not the subject of significant



Figure 2.1: *Mogg's New London Guide, 1849* (London: Edward Mogg, [1849]) (part)  
(Image © British Library Board).

development in the early 1840s, when the story is purportedly set; not until 'the later 1840s and 1850s' did it become the subject of 'a burst of building activity' such as Basil describes.<sup>3</sup> In any event, no omnibus went from the City to that part of London in the 1840s: even at the

<sup>2</sup> Some contemporary reviewers suggested that Hollyoake Square was 'somewhere about the neighbourhood of Camden Town' ('*Basil: A Story of Modern Life*', *The Examiner*, no. 2339 (November 27 1852), pp. 756-57 (p. 756)), to the north-east rather than the north-west of Regent's Park (see also [John William Kaye], "'Esmond" and "Basil"', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 32 (December 1852), pp. 576-86; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 35 ('[T]he scene is laid in a scarce-finished suburban square (say in [...] Camden Town)'); 'A Trio of Novels. Esmond, Reuben Medlicot, and Basil', *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 241 (January 1853), pp. 70-79 (p. 77) (Basil marks Margaret down 'in a square near Camden-town'); 'Mr. Collins's "Basil"', *The Observer*, January 3 1853, p. 6 ('One fine morning, [...] Basil [...] encountered in a Camden Town omnibus, a young girl of extraordinary beauty'); '*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*', *The Age*, no. 32 (January 8 1853), p. 6 (the object of Basil's adoration is 'a chance passenger with himself in a Camden Town omnibus')), but the suggestion is implausible, as an omnibus from the City of London to Camden Town would not have taken Basil in the direction of his own house, so he would have had no reason to board it.

<sup>3</sup> *A History of the County of Middlesex, volume IX: Hampstead and Paddington Parishes*, ed. T. F. T. Baker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 60.

end of that decade, the only omnibuses to St John's Wood left from Charing Cross and travelled no further than the Eyre Arms, at the junction of Wellington Road and Grove Road.<sup>4</sup> It was not until 'about 1850' that the 'Atlas' line began to run to and from Swiss Cottage;<sup>5</sup> only then did it become possible to catch a 'City Atlas' omnibus from London Bridge, via Bank (no doubt where Basil got on), along Oxford Street (no doubt where Margaret and her companion got on, perhaps after visiting Mr Sherwin's shop) as far as Orchard Street (no doubt where Basil would have got off, had Margaret not got on),<sup>6</sup> then up Orchard Street and Baker Street, round the west side of Regent's Park to Wellington Road, past the Eyre Arms, up Finchley Road (presumably where Margaret and her companion got off, followed by Basil), to Swiss Cottage.<sup>7</sup>

The interior of North Villa is no less firmly situated in the moment of its composition than the exterior. Less than a week after he first sees Margaret, Basil returns to Hollyoake Square – this time in a carriage, in order to profit 'to the utmost' by 'the common weakness of rank-

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<sup>4</sup> See *Mogg's Omnibus Guide and Metropolitan Carriage Time Table* (London: Edward Mogg, 1848), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Records of the Manor, Parish, and Borough of Hampstead, in the County of London, to December 31st, 1889*, ed. F. E. Baines (London: Whittaker and Co., 1890), p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> The precise location of Basil's father's London house, 'nearly half-an-hour[']s' walk from Regent's Park (vol. I, p. 123), is not specified. Given that it is both 'a grand house' (vol. III, p. 276) – so grand that Mr Sherwin asks to be shown over it by the steward while the family are out of town (vol. I, p. 203) – and situated in a square (vol. III, p. 211), it is most likely in Grosvenor Square in Mayfair.

<sup>7</sup> See *London Omnibus and Thames Steamboat Guide. February, 1851* (London: S. Johnson, [1851]), p. 26 (route 10a). Basil's journeys to and from Cornwall in the later stages of the novel are similarly anachronistic. It is explicit that Ralph and Clara bring him back 'on the railway' (vol. III, p. 282), and implicit that he had travelled there by the same means ('At the time I had resolved on, I left London for Cornwall' (vol. III, p. 217)), just as Collins had done in 1850, when he travelled by train as far as Plymouth, where the railway 'stops short' (Collins, *Rambles Beyond Railways*, p. 7), and then crossed into Cornwall by boat. But it was not possible to travel to, or anywhere near, Cornwall on the railway in the early 1840s, when *Basil* is purportedly set. Only after 1 May 1844, when the railway from Bristol to Exeter was completed, could travellers to Cornwall go by train to Exeter, from where coaches went on as far as Truro; the railway from Exeter to Plymouth did not open until 2 April 1849 (see E. T. MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway, Volume I: 1833-1863*, rev. C. R. Clinker (London: Ian Allan, 1964), pp. 92; 156). Collins would be more accurate in his description of the same journey in *The Dead Secret* (1857), which is very precisely set in 1845, a couple of years after *Basil*: see Wilkie Collins, *The Dead Secret*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 144 (Mrs Jazeph asks 'a question about what coaches met the rail at Exeter to take travellers into Cornwall'); 146 ('Towards the close of the evening, [...] the Druid fast coach, running through Cornwall as far as Truro, set down three inside passengers at the door of the booking-office, on arriving at its destination'); 259 ('[I]n the unfinished state of the railroad at that time, two days would elapse before an answer from London could reasonably be hoped for').

worship and wealth-worship in men of Mr. Sherwin's order' (vol. I, p. 195) – with a view to obtaining her father's consent to their marriage.

On my arrival at North Villa, I was shown into what I presumed was the drawing-room. Everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly-varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls, with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet; the showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue, and the still showier carpet of red and yellow, seemed as if they had come out of the shop yesterday; the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought; not one leaf even of the music on the piano was dogs-eared or worn. Never was a richly-furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this—the eye ached at looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen, hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top, glared on you: the paper, the curtains, the carpet, glared on you: the books, the wax-flowers in glass-cases, the chairs in flaring chintz-covers, the china-plates on the door, the blue and pink glass vases and cups ranged on the chimney-piece, the over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves, all glared on you. There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. All surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were. The room would have given a nervous man the headache, before he had been in it a quarter of an hour (vol. I, pp. 198-200).

As was seen in chapter 1 above, this passage (at the beginning of folio 19<sup>r</sup> of the manuscript) was written in the summer of 1851. Indeed, if the suggestion made in that chapter is right, and Collins took a four-week break from writing *Basil* at the end of folio 18<sup>r</sup>, then it is possible to ascribe it with precision to Monday 18 August 1851. Moreover, Basil's description of Mr Sherwin's drawing room underwent no significant revision between writing and publication: the manuscript text differs from the printed text by only a few words.<sup>8</sup>

As Collins wrote to Richard Bentley that autumn, the summer of 1851 was a time when 'three young gentlemen' had

been making an immense stir in the world of Art, and earned the distinction of being

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<sup>8</sup> The printed text adds 'oppressively' in the second sentence, 'still showier' in the third sentence, and 'secrecy' in the sixth sentence; in the manuscript text, the rosewood table is in a 'dazzling' rather than a 'painfully high' state of polish, and the chintz-covers on the chairs are 'bright' rather than 'flaring'; the seventh sentence of the manuscript text reads: 'All surrounding objects seemed oppressively close, much nearer to the eye than they really were'.

attacked in the Times (any notice there is a distinction) – and defended in a special pamphlet by Ruskin – the redoubtable Pre-Raphael Brotherhood!!

One of these “Brothers” happens to be my brother as well – the other two Millais and Hunt are intimate friends.<sup>9</sup>

Collins was well acquainted with Pre-Raphaelitism at the time that he was writing *Basil*. Not only had he written a long review of the exhibition of the Royal Academy, including a number of Pre-Raphaelite works, that was published in *Bentley's Miscellany* at the beginning of June 1851, but he also visited Millais, Hunt, and his brother Charles while they spent the summer and autumn of that year at Worcester Park Farm near Ewell in Surrey, where, according to Hunt, he took ‘a lively interest in our pursuits’ and ‘professed a desire to write an article on our method of work’, although the ‘intention was never acted upon’.<sup>10</sup> In those circumstances, some scholars have detected Pre-Raphaelite influence in *Basil*. Stephanie Grilli writes that ‘In this novel, one gets a sense in words of what the [Pre-Raphaelite] Brotherhood achieved in images. We find the same opposition to Type, the same roughness of composition, abruptness of arrangement, and search for models outside the accepted sphere,’<sup>11</sup> while Simon Cooke argues that the ‘dense fields of microscopic detail’ that are a feature of Collins’s early fiction ‘exactly match’ the obsessive itemising of things in Pre-Raphaelite painting, for reasons that are ‘essentially Pre-Raphaelite in nature’; Collins’s writing of Mr Sherwin’s parlour, for example, ‘manipulates a Pre-Raphaelite mode to heighten the reader/viewer’s perceptions’, using detail to ‘impose an intense perception of the

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 28 November 1851: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 72-73 (p. 73).

<sup>10</sup> Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, p. 304. The article on Pre-Raphaelitism to which Hunt refers may be related to an article, also never written, that Collins proposed to the editor of *The Leader* early in 1852: ‘I think I shall be able to do something amusing for you, about the Pre-Raphaelites painting School in the country. John Millais (entre nous) is going to lend me his diary’ (Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 12 January 1852: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 78-80 (p. 80)).

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Jeanne Grilli, ‘Pre-Raphaelite Portraiture, 1848-1854’, PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1980, pp. 86-87.

real' in a way that has 'many parallels' with the work of Holman Hunt in particular.<sup>12</sup>

Collins's review of the Pre-Raphaelite works in the exhibition of the Royal Academy suggests a further direction in which the quest for influence might be taken. In that article, Collins sought to summarise the 'novel and strongly-marked style' that Messrs C. Collins, Millais, and Hunt had 'adopted alike':

The characteristics of this style, in the eyes of the general spectator, may, we think, be pretty correctly described as follows:—an almost painful minuteness of finish and detail; a disregard of the ordinary rules of composition and colour; and an evident intention of not appealing to any popular predilections on the subject of grace or beauty.<sup>13</sup>

It is tempting to look for parallels between that account of the visual impact of the Pre-Raphaelite pictures exhibited in May 1851 and Collins's description, written just a few weeks later, of the drawing room at North Villa, whose strongly pictorial quality was apparent to the first critics of *Basil*; thus the reviewer in *The Athenæum* relented briefly in the course of a generally hostile notice to praise it as a 'bit of "still life" [...] artistic and graphic in detail'.<sup>14</sup> Although couched in very much less vehement terms, Collins's account of the principal characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite style does not differ significantly from the accounts of other commentators on the exhibition. *The Morning Chronicle*, for example, wrote that

The "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" are amply represented by Mr. Millais, Mr. Hunt, and Mr. Collins. The extravagances of these young gentlemen are in no ways abated. They still [...] enamel their canvass with a perfect blaze of the gaudiest colours,

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Cooke, "'A Weird Attraction": Wilkie Collins, M. E. Braddon, and the Influence of Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetics', *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2007), pp. 5-16 (pp. 8-10). Andrew Lycett also sees the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism in *Basil*, writing of Basil's dream that 'As was often the case in Pre-Raphaelite art, the idealised angel in the house was powerless against the immediacy of sexual lust. But, also like the Pre-Raphaelites, the message of Wilkie's novel was ultimately moralistic' in that 'Margaret is manifestly punished for her sexual transgression' (Lycett, *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*, p. 105), and Catherine Peters detects Pre-Raphaelite influence of a rather different kind in Basil's description of Margaret's waist as 'naturally low, and left to its natural place and natural size' (vol. I, p. 119), noting that 'the Pre-Raphaelites encouraged their women to abandon crinolines and corsets' (Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 119).

<sup>13</sup> [W. Wilkie Collins], 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 29 (June 1851), pp. 617-27 (pp. 622-23).

<sup>14</sup> [Daniel Owen Maddy], '*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*', *The Athenæum*, no. 1310 (December 4 1852), pp. 1322-23 (p. 1323).

without anything like shade or the softening down of perspective.<sup>15</sup>

*The Times* struck the same note. Its first review of the exhibition asserted that the ‘faith’ of the Pre-Raphaelites ‘seems to consist in an absolute contempt for perspective and the known laws of light and shade, [and] an aversion to beauty in every shape’,<sup>16</sup> while the second went even further:

With the utmost readiness to humour even the caprices of art, when they bear the stamp of originality and genius, we can extend no toleration to a mere servile imitation of the cramped style, false perspective, and crude colour of remote antiquity. We do not want to see what Fuseli termed drapery “snapped instead of folded,” faces bloated into apoplexy, or extenuated into skeletons, colour borrowed from the jars in a druggist’s shop, and expression forced into caricature. [...] That morbid infatuation which sacrifices truth, beauty, and genuine feeling to mere eccentricity, deserves no quarter at the hands of the public [...].<sup>17</sup>

It is not difficult to read Basil’s account of the crude and gaudy colouration and lack of shade in Mr Sherwin’s very unbeautiful drawing room as echoing such complaints as these, while his observation that ‘All surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were’ can be compared to the criticism that the Brotherhood’s pictures lacked ‘the softening down of perspective’; other reviewers complained that in the Pre-Raphaelites’ imitations of nature ‘Every form, near or remote, is elaborated with the same mechanical minuteness’, undifferentiated by ‘gradation of tint, tone, and force’, so that they ‘all strike the eye with the same force, and, consequently, all seem to be projected on the same vertical plane’,<sup>18</sup> and that in Charles Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) and Millais’s *The Woodman’s Daughter* (Guildhall Art Gallery, London) ‘the greens are all of the same intensity, and approach the eye too closely’.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it was not only *The Times* that responded to the Pre-Raphaelite works exhibited in 1851 in terms of revulsion even stronger

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Royal Academy. Second Notice’, *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26334 (May 8 1851), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy. (Private View.) First Notice’, *The Times*, no. 20792 (May 3 1851), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy. Second Notice’, *The Times*, no. 20795 (May 7 1851), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 161 (November 1 1851), pp. 285-86 (p. 286).

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Royal Academy’, *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1794 (June 7 1851), p. 396.

than that expressed by Basil when shown into Mr Sherwin's room. *The Builder* opined that 'the so-called pre-Raffaelites are as remote from the aim and inspiration of the ancient Italians, as the disgusting baboon in form and feature is dissimilar to the virgins and angels of the divine Raffaele',<sup>20</sup> while *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* called on Shakespeare to lend vehemence to its declaration that

We have not the morbid appetite which relishes these productions; and whilst we sit at such a banquet as is now spread before us we are not disposed to feast with "Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water; that, in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets, and swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog.""<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding these apparent parallels, however, it would be wrong to conclude that Collins was seeking to compare Mr Sherwin's distressingly hideous decorative scheme to what such hostile critics regarded as the unpalatable excesses of Pre-Raphaelite painting. In the first place, it is surely unlikely that he would so openly and deliberately have insulted his brother and two of his closest friends. Second, in his own review of the Pre-Raphaelite pictures in *Bentley's Miscellany*, he praised rather than condemned them. Collins's detailed observations on those pictures are almost entirely laudatory. The flowers and water-plants in his brother's *Convent Thoughts* 'are painted with the most astonishing minuteness and fidelity to nature'. In Millais's *Mariana* (Tate Gallery, London), 'The dress of the figure, the stained glass on the windows, the stool from which she has risen, all display the most dazzling and lustrous richness of colour', while in the same artist's *The Return of the Dove to the Ark* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) 'the draperies are studied and arranged, with great skill and power; and the flesh-tints are forcible in an extraordinary degree'. As for *The Woodman's Daughter*, 'the woody background of the scene is really marvellous in its

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Royal Academy', *The Builder*, vol. 9, no. 341 (May 10 1851), pp. 292-93 (p. 293).

<sup>21</sup> 'The Royal Academy', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 210 (June 1851), pp. 377-81 (p. 378).

truthfulness and elaboration'. Holman Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Silvia from Proteus*

(Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery)

exceeds, in some respects, even Mr. Collins and Mr. Millais in the intricacies of high finish, and in minute imitation of the minutest objects in nature. "Silvia" is kneeling upon some dry leaves, treated with an elaboration beyond which art cannot go. The drapery, too, of this figure is painted with the most masterly firmness, brilliancy, and power; every inequality of the wooded background is represented with admirable fidelity to nature; and the patches of sunlight falling upon shady places through gaps in the trees above, shine with a dazzling brightness which never once reminds us of the trickeries of the palette—which is the evident result of the most intelligent and the most unflinching study.

There is no mention of faulty perspective in any of this, no suggestion that the Pre-Raphaelites are defective in their rendition of light and shade. As regards colouration, the only words are words of praise. Collins did acknowledge that the three painters had certain common faults: their 'strict attention to detail precludes, at present, any attainment of harmony and singleness of effect', and they 'appear to us to be wanting in one great desideratum of all art—judgment in selection'. Nonetheless,

We offer these observations in no hostile spirit: we believe that Messrs. Millais, Collins, and Hunt, have in them the material of painters of first-rate ability: we admire sincerely their earnestness of purpose, their originality of thought, their close and reverent study of nature. But we cannot, at the same time, fail to perceive that they are as yet only emerging from the darkness to the true light; that they are at the critical turning point of their career; and that, on the course they are now to take[,] on their renunciation of certain false principles in their present practice, depends our chance of gladly welcoming them, one day, as masters of their art—as worthy successors of the greatest among their predecessors in the English school.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> [Collins], 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', pp. 623-25. Not all scholars read Collins's observations on the Pre-Raphaelite pictures exhibited in 1851 as they are read here. Although Sophia Andres describes his article as a 'laudatory review', in which he 'praised the fundamental Pre-Raphaelite principles' (Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 71), Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan consider that it 'reveals a marked ambivalence to Pre-Raphaelitism' (Dolin and Dougan, 'Fatal Newness', p. 7) and Simon Cooke that it 'oscillates between full-blown praise and harsh criticism' (Cooke, "'A Weird Attraction'", p. 8), while Graham Law and Andrew Maunder suggest that Collins was 'wary in support of the rebels' and that his responses to Pre-Raphaelitism were 'complex' (Law and Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, p. 24). Collins's biographers take a similar line: Andrew Lycett writes that the review 'was strangely oblique [...]. Wilkie's critique reflected his ambivalent response to the Brotherhood' (Lycett, *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*, p. 91), Melisa Klimaszewski that it 'was gently critical of the Pre-Raphaelite movement' (Klimaszewski, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 40), and Catherine Peters that it demonstrates that Collins was 'baffled' by Pre-Raphaelitism, and 'disliked it, in secret, as much as Dickens did' (Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 104).

Third, and most significant, Collins's review did not just praise the Pre-Raphaelites; it also alluded to the celebrated letter in their defence that John Ruskin had published only two weeks earlier. It was the second review of the exhibition in *The Times*, quoted above, that prompted Ruskin to write to the paper to express his regret that the tone of its critique 'should have been scornful as well as severe'. Ruskin regretted that tone

First, because the mere labour bestowed on these works, and their fidelity to a certain order of truth, [...] ought at once to have placed them above the level of mere contempt; and, secondly, because I believe these young artists to be at a most critical period of their career—at a turning-point, from which they may either sink into nothingness or rise to very real greatness.

Having specifically praised the thoroughness and truthfulness of Charles Collins's depiction of 'the water plant, *Alisma Plantago*',<sup>23</sup> which in itself served to refute *The Times*'s claim that 'these men "sacrifice *truth* as well as feeling to eccentricity"', Ruskin went on to note the assertion 'that in these pictures there is a "*servile* imitation of *false* perspective"':

To which I have just this to answer:—

That there is not one single error in perspective in four out of the five pictures in question; and that in Millais' "Mariana" there is but this one—that the top of the green curtain in the distant window has too low a vanishing-point; and that I will undertake, if need be, to point out and prove a dozen worse errors in perspective in any twelve pictures, containing architecture, taken at random from among the works of the popular painters of the day.

As regards 'draperies "snapped instead of folded"',

there is not a single study of drapery in the whole Academy, be it in large works or small, which for perfect truth, power, and finish could be compared for an instant with the black sleeve of the Julia, or with the velvet on the breast and the chain mail of the Valentine, of Mr. Hunt's picture; or with the white draperies on the table of Mr. Millais' "Mariana," and of the right-hand figure in the same painter's "Dove returning to the Ark."

Indeed, 'as studies both of drapery and of every minor detail, there has been nothing in art so

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<sup>23</sup> Ruskin claimed to 'have a special acquaintance' with *Alisma plantago*, which makes it the more surprising that in fact 'there is no *Alisma plantago* in Collins's painting' (Elizabeth Deas, 'The Missing *Alisma*: Ruskin's Botanical Error', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, vol. 10 (Fall 2001), pp. 4-13 (p. 7)).

earnest and so complete as these pictures since the days of Albert Dürer'.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that Collins had read Ruskin's letter before he wrote his own comments on the Pre-Raphaelites, and it is equally clear that he was concerned to endorse and reinforce Ruskin's efforts on his friends' behalf. In the final sentence of his article quoted above ('they are at the critical turning point of their career; [...] on the course they are now to take [...] depends our chance of [...] welcoming them [...] as worthy successors of the greatest [...] in the English school') Collins adopted not only Ruskin's sentiment but also his vocabulary ('I believe these young artists to be at a most critical period of their career—at a turning-point, from which they may either sink into nothingness or rise to very real greatness'). That Collins knew and agreed with what Ruskin had written is also apparent from their common approbation of the 'earnestness' of the young painters, from their common praise of the draperies in the works of Millais and Hunt, and above all from Collins's commendation of his brother's and Hunt's 'fidelity to nature', a phrase which appears twice in the space of a single paragraph of his article. '[F]idelity to a certain order of truth' was the virtue for which Ruskin particularly commended the Pre-Raphaelites; Collins's article in *Bentley's Miscellany* was one of the first occasions on which any reviewer of the Royal Academy exhibition of 1851 followed Ruskin's lead by praising the movement for its insistence on the truthful representation of nature.<sup>25</sup> The apparent similarities between Collins's description of Mr Sherwin's drawing

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<sup>24</sup> The Author of "Modern Painters" (John Ruskin), 'The Pre-Raffaellites', *The Times*, no. 20800 (May 13 1851), pp. 8-9, reprinted in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (39 vols) (London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. 12 (1904) (pp. 319; 321; 322-23).

<sup>25</sup> Collins was second only to William Michael Rossetti, who 'immediately tailored his own critical practice to match Ruskin's powerful argument' (Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 59) and wrote a further review of the exhibition that was published just a day before Collins's article:

We have already had occasion to allude to the works of Messrs. Millais and Hunt—works the principle of which it is essential to understand at the outset; for they are among the very few in the Academy whose principle can be clearly stated and apprehended, or indeed which are animated by any, apart from the mystifying traditions or conventions of the studio.

This principle may be broadly laid down as "the truth, and nothing but the truth": we should add "the whole truth", were it possible to *reproduce* the facts of nature, instead of merely *representing* them proximately (William Michael Rossetti), 'The Royal Academy Exhibition [Fourth Notice]', *The Spectator*, vol. 24, no. 1196

room and hostile reviews of the Pre-Raphaelite pictures of 1851 are, then, no more than coincidental. It is hardly plausible that Collins should have intended in *Basil* openly to invoke the wounding criticisms of his friends' work whose rejection by Ruskin he had endorsed anonymously just three months earlier.

While some scholars have sought to detect Pre-Raphaelite influence in *Basil*, others have gone in the opposite direction, arguing that *Basil* was itself an influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, and on one Pre-Raphaelite work in particular. Although it has been suggested that his friend's 'story of modern life' can be associated with a small group of drawings made by Millais in 1853-54 that Holman Hunt characterised as 'illustrating unconsecrated passion in modern life',<sup>26</sup> it is more frequently argued that Collins's novel was a source of inspiration for what Millais called Hunt's 'modern picture',<sup>27</sup> *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) (figure 2.2); indeed, Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan go so far as to claim that 'Most art historians

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(May 31 1851), pp. 523-24 (p. 523)). F. G. Stephens was also quick to follow Ruskin's lead, praising in particular the landscape of *The Woodman's Daughter*, in which every weed and every leaf is 'given with a truth which is marvellous. The scene is a wild fir plantation, so the reader may readily imagine the wonderful variety of objects and qualities produced, and every one with the utmost fidelity to nature', and describing the background of *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* as 'an admirable transcript from nature' (Laura Savage (Frederic George Stephens), 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy [Third Notice]', *The Critic*, vol. 10, no. 245 (June 14 1851), pp. 289-90 (p. 290)).

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. II, p. 430. The suggestion that *Basil* was an influence on these drawings is made by Lindsay Errington (see Errington, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art, 1840-1860*, pp. 405-406) and Alastair Grieve (see A. I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Section II: The Pre-Raphaelite Modern-Life Subject* (Norwich: Real World Publications, 1976), pp. 25-26), but there is no evidence for it other than the fact that Millais had read and enjoyed *Basil* (see John Everett Millais, letter to Mrs Thomas Combe, December 1852: John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy* (2 vols) (London: Methuen and Co., 1899), vol. I, pp. 190-91 (p. 190)), and the only drawing in the group that could be said to be even remotely thematically related to *Basil* is *Retribution* (1854) (British Museum, London).

<sup>27</sup> John Everett Millais, letter to William Holman Hunt, 7 February 1854: The Morgan Library and Museum, MA 1946, folio 2<sup>r</sup>.

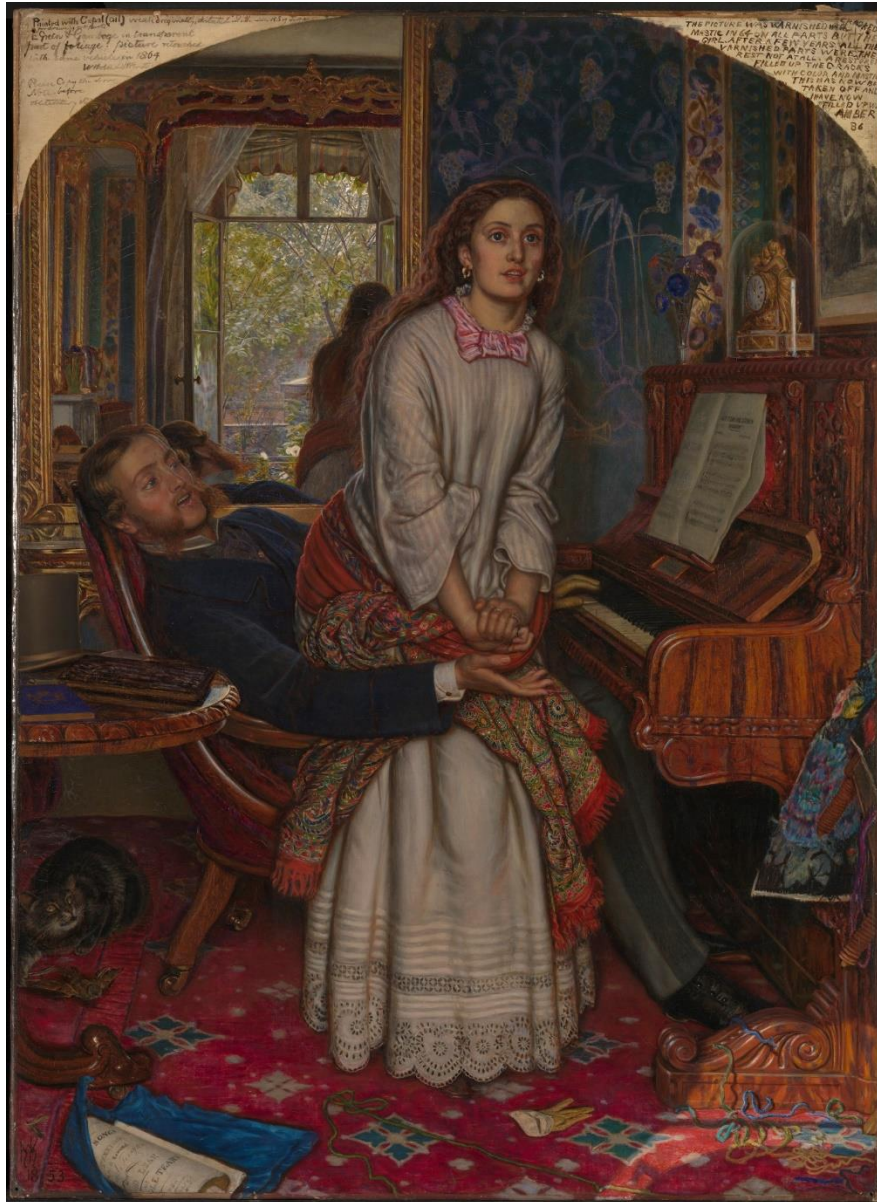


Figure 2.2: William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), oil on canvas, 76.2 × 55.9 cm (arched) (Tate Britain, London) (Image © Tate).

agree' that *Basil* was 'a significant source for Hunt's description of the darkness and repulsiveness of modern life'.<sup>28</sup> Some have seen a thematic connection: Judith Bronkhurst, for example, suggested at one time that Collins's text 'probably influenced' Hunt's picture inasmuch as both are concerned with 'the fallen woman'.<sup>29</sup> But that is both over-broad and

<sup>28</sup> Dolin and Dougan, 'Fatal Newness', pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Bronkhurst, 'The Awakening Conscience', in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), pp. 120-21 (p. 121); in much the same vein, Alastair Grieve writes that 'It seems likely that [...] the subjects of novels such as [*Basil* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853)] gave [Hunt] the courage to paint *The Awakening*

inconsistent with the evidence: not only are there few similarities between the unrepentantly unfaithful wife Margaret Sherwin and the repentant mistress of *The Awakening Conscience*, but insofar as Hunt acknowledged a literary inspiration, it was ‘little Emily’ in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, published in 1850.<sup>30</sup> Others have detected visual correspondences between text and picture. Ronald Parkinson suggests that ‘It is not so much the plot [of *Basil*] that may have interested Hunt as the author’s vivid and realistic descriptions, particularly that [...] of the interior of the linen-draper’s house’, a passage that ‘could be describing the painting itself’;<sup>31</sup> in similar vein, Lindsay Errington writes that Collins’s depiction of Mr Sherwin’s drawing room has a ‘terrifying and almost surrealist clarity’ which anticipates *The Awakening Conscience*,<sup>32</sup> Catherine Peters that Hunt’s picture ‘might be an illustration’ of his friend’s novel,<sup>33</sup> Alison Smith that Collins’s words ‘could almost be taken as a description in prose of the interior in Hunt’s painting’,<sup>34</sup> and Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan that ‘*Basil* must [...] have been in Hunt’s mind as his painting developed’, inasmuch as ‘Many of the elements’ in Collins’s narrative

are repeated, almost verbatim as it were, in *The Awakening Conscience*—the varnished and polished woods, the gaudy wallpaper of birds and flowers, the curtains,

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*Conscience*’ (Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Section II: The Pre-Raphaelite Modern-Life Subject*, p. 35). Bronkhurst does not repeat the suggestion that the subject matter of *The Awakening Conscience* was influenced by *Basil* in her later catalogue raisonné, although she does suggest that Hunt’s symbolic detail of a cat tormenting a bird may have been inspired by a scene in the novel (vol. II, pp. 80-81): see Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: a catalogue raisonné* (2 vols) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), vol. 1, pp. 165-68.

<sup>30</sup> See Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. II, p. 429.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Parkinson, ‘The Awakening Conscience and the Still Small Voice’, in *The Tate Gallery 1976-8: Illustrated Biennial Report and Catalogue of Acquisitions* (London: Tate Gallery, 1978), pp. 21-29 (p. 28).

<sup>32</sup> Errington, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art, 1840-1860*, p. 422. Errington makes a particularly wide-ranging claim for Collins’s influence on Hunt’s picture, writing that it may have consisted in his ‘theories of modernity expressed in his preface, his claim for the novelist’s right to deal accurately with vice for moral ends, and still more, his theories on exact minute background detailing as an accompaniment to events of great emotional intensity’ (p. 421); that last suggestion (the exact opposite of the suggestion of Simon Cooke noted above, that Collins derived those theories from the Pre-Raphaelites, and Holman Hunt in particular) is taken up by Alastair Grieve, who suggests that Hunt noticed Collins’s ‘use of detail to heighten the pathos of a modern-life subject’ (Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Section II: The Pre-Raphaelite Modern-Life Subject*, p. 35).

<sup>33</sup> Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> Alison Smith, catalogue entry for William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, in Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, Alison Smith, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 134.

the bright colors of the carpet, the unopened books on the round rosewood table, and the new music scores.<sup>35</sup>

Such comparisons are unfounded. True to the principle of ‘fidelity to nature’, Hunt based the room depicted in *The Awakening Conscience* not on Collins’s fictional account but on a real room, in what he described as a ‘Courtesan’s house’: Woodbine Villa, 7 Alpha Place, St John’s Wood.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, despite what some have seen as their superficial similarity, there is a crucial difference between the two rooms. The one in North Villa is marked above all by brilliance and glare. The one in Woodbine Villa, on the other hand, is painted in ‘dull indigoes and reds’, as the reviewer in *The Athenæum* noted, which ‘make it melancholy and appropriate’ to the subject matter of the picture.<sup>37</sup> The brilliance in the room depicted by Hunt is not inside but outside, in the garden at which the girl is staring through the window in the hope of redemption from the literal and spiritual darkness that presently envelops her.

That said, however, there is a point of correspondence between the rooms depicted in *Basil* and in *The Awakening Conscience* that goes further than mere visual resemblance. Writing a few years after it was first exhibited, F. G. Stephens said of Hunt’s picture that

It showed the interior of one of those *maisons damnées* which the wealth of a seducer has furnished for the luxury of a woman who has sold herself and her soul to him. [...] The whole room is in keeping with the subject: gaudy furniture, hard, varnishy, and new, unconsecrated to the domesticities by long use; many large mirrors, utterly disproportioned to the size of the apartment; ornaments, all in a flashy, splendid, and showy taste, explain what has been the early education of the inhabitant.<sup>38</sup>

Given that Stephens’s account of the painting was approved by the artist himself,<sup>39</sup> it is clear

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<sup>35</sup> Dolin and Dougan, ‘Fatal Newness’, pp. 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> See Bronkurst, *William Holman Hunt: a catalogue raisonné*, vol. 1, p. 165.

<sup>37</sup> [George Walter Thornbury], ‘Royal Academy’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1384 (May 6 1854), pp. 559-61 (p. 561); see also [Frederic George Stephens], ‘The Two Pre-Raphaelites. Third Article. Concluded’, *The Crayon*, vol. 3, no. 12 (December 1856), pp. 353-56 (p. 355) (‘The color of the picture has a subdued and gloomy richness about it, which befits the subject’).

<sup>38</sup> [Frederic George Stephens], *William Holman Hunt and His Works. A Memoir of the Artist’s Life, With Description of His Pictures* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1860), pp. 32-34.

<sup>39</sup> Stephens noted on the title page of his own copy of *William Holman Hunt and His Works* that ‘All the proofs

that Hunt regarded the newness of the hard and varnishy furniture chosen by the girl's seducer, 'unconsecrated to the domesticities by long use', as a symbolic indicator of the moral character of the inhabitants of the room. In that regard, Stephens's account of *The Awakening Conscience* echoes and gives Hunt's retrospective imprimatur to what John Ruskin had written in a letter to *The Times* at the time of the first exhibition of the work in 1854. In that letter Ruskin acknowledged that 'to many people the careful rendering of the inferior details in this picture cannot but be at first offensive, as calling their attention away from the principal subject', but went on to assert that 'it is based on a truer principle of the pathetic than any of the common artistical expedients of the schools':

There is not a single object in all that room—common, modern, vulgar (in the vulgar sense, as it may be), but it becomes tragical, if rightly read. That furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood—is there nothing to be learnt from the terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home? Those embossed books, vain and useless—they also new—marked with no happy wearing of beloved leaves [...].<sup>40</sup>

There is a striking similarity of language between Ruskin's exegesis of the symbolic significance of the furniture in Hunt's picture and Collins's account of Mr Sherwin's drawing room, and while any suggestion that Ruskin was influenced by or had even read *Basil* could not be supported by evidence, such observations as that Collins's description of North Villa 'presages Ruskin's interpretation of "The Awakening Conscience"',<sup>41</sup> or that Ruskin's comments 'read like echoes' of Collins,<sup>42</sup> are nonetheless appealing. The 'terrible lustre' of Ruskin's rosewood furniture does seem to echo the 'painfully high state of polish' of Collins's, and Ruskin's 'fatal newness' is so close to Collins's 'Everything was oppressively

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of this text were, before its publication, submitted to Mr W. H. Hunt and thoroughly examined by him' (see Robert Wilkes, 'The Hidden Pre-Raphaelite: The Art and Writings of Frederic George Stephens from 1848-70', PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2019, p. 121).

<sup>40</sup> The Author of "Modern Painters" (John Ruskin), 'The Præ-Raphaelites', *The Times*, no. 21750 (May 25 1854), p. 7; *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 12, pp. 333-35 (pp. 334-35).

<sup>41</sup> Parkinson, 'The Awakening Conscience and the Still Small Voice', p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Errington, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art, 1840-1860*, p. 423.

new' that at least one critic has used Ruskin's phrase in such a way as to suggest that it appears in Collins's text.<sup>43</sup> But to speculate as to whether Ruskin was echoing Collins is to miss the deeper significance of the coincidences between Collins's novel and Ruskin's account of Hunt's painting, subsequently endorsed by the artist. Although many critics see Basil's appalled reaction to Mr Sherwin's drawing room as no more than a demonstration of aristocratic distaste for the man's *nouveau riche* vulgarity,<sup>44</sup> while others regard it as a manifestation of wider concerns about the consequences of increasing social mobility – Anne Witchard, for example, writes that the 'shiny newness' of Mr Sherwin's suburban villa signifies '[a] moral and cultural malaise, assumed to be attendant on the rapid material prosperity that raised tradesmen to the ranks of the middle class'<sup>45</sup> – those coincidences suggest that there is in fact an ethical as well as a purely class dimension to his response, and that Kate Flint is right to say that Collins shares with Hunt 'a common mode of looking at [...] furniture' inasmuch as they both regard it as not only a social but also a moral indicator.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, p. 80 ('The Sherwins' drawing room, with its "fatal newness", exposes their brashness in a way that is turned back on to the perceiving subject').

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Philip O'Neill, *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 90 ('Sherwin's vulgarity is reflected in his furniture. There is no shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in his room. After all, he is only a vulgar, shallow commercial man, and the appearance does correspond with reality'); Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament: A Social History Since 1450* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 149 ('For Basil, accustomed to the gradually accreted contents and faded colours of an old family interior, the glaring drawing room of North Villa was a moral judgement on newly acquired wealth'); Maurizio Ascari, 'Deception and Detection: The Domestic Setting in William Wilkie Collins's Sensation Fiction', in *The House of Fiction as the House of Life*, ed. Francesca Saggini and Anna Eurichetta Soccio (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 128-37 (p. 130) (Mr Sherwin's house 'mirrors the identity of its owners, whose main feature is the ostentation of recent money'); Sarah Bilston, *The Promise of the Suburbs: A Victorian History in Literature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 60 ('[T]he Sherwins, wealthy as they seem, are utterly lacking in the cultural capital that would render them members of a "real" elite. Their habitation looks rich [...], but their habitus, embodied in their aesthetic choices, is palpably far below Basil's').

<sup>45</sup> Anne Witchard, "'A Fatal Freshness": Mid-Victorian Suburbophobia', in *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*, ed. Lawrence Phillips and Anne Witchard (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 23-40 (pp. 31-32); see also Gavin Budge, *Romanticism, Medicine and the Natural Supernatural: Transcendent Vision and Bodily Spectres, 1789-1852* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 192 (Basil's description of Mr Sherwin's 'glaringly overdecorated living room, [...] where "all surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were", [...] connotes the multifariousness of a democratic modernity which cannot be mastered by a single, unified perspective').

<sup>46</sup> Kate Flint, 'Reading *The awakening conscience* rightly', in *Pre-Raphaelites re-viewed*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 45-65 (p. 52). Robina Williams makes much the same

Just as Hunt was concerned in his detailed depiction of the gaudy, showy, new furniture at Woodbine Villa to engender a sense of moral unease in the viewer, so Collins was concerned in his equally detailed depiction of the equally gaudy, showy, new furniture at North Villa to engender a sense of moral unease in the reader. However new and over-polished it may be, a rosewood table is not ordinarily called ‘oppressive’ or ‘painful’ any more than it is called ‘fatal’ or ‘tragical’; in both rooms, the inhabitants’ decorative choices signify something more than ordinary vulgarity and provoke a response that goes beyond social disdain and enters the sphere of moral condemnation.

In what follows, it is argued that the sense of moral unease to which Basil’s account of the furnishings of Mr Sherwin’s drawing room would have given rise can best be understood in the context of a cultural event of the summer of 1851 that was for contemporaries of much greater significance than Pre-Raphaelitism (and one to which scholars have suggested that there are implicit allusions in Collins’s text):<sup>47</sup> the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations that opened in Hyde Park on 1 May. As Basil says, Mr Sherwin’s glaring and inharmonious decorative scheme is in ‘bad taste’ (vol. I, p. 257), and it was to the improvement of English taste that the Great Exhibition was particularly directed by its chief promoter and organiser, Henry Cole. For Cole and his principal associates, the painter Richard Redgrave and the architect Owen Jones (the designer of the decorative scheme of the

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point when she writes that ‘The similarity of appearance of these two rooms is the externalisation of thematic similarity’; she suggests that the thematic similarity consists in the fact that ‘The girl in Hunt’s picture [...] has obtained that room by selling herself’ while ‘Margaret Sherwin [...] is to be sold to the aristocratic Basil’ (Robina Williams, ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-Century Painting on the Novels of Wilkie Collins’, MPhil thesis, University of Liverpool, 1992, pp. 107-108).

<sup>47</sup> Dehn Gilmore sees the Exhibition ‘peek[ing] out of’ the text in the way that ‘the omnibus vehicle that 1851’s Crystal Palace show brought to new prominence becomes a “perambulatory exhibition-room of the eccentricities of human nature [...] in which persons of all classes and all temperaments are so oddly collected together, and so immediately contrasted and confronted with one another” as well as in the ‘exhibition-resonant’ terms in which Basil catalogues the ““showy”” contents of Mr Sherwin’s drawing room (Dehn Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and the Space of Art: Fictional Form on Display* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 85-86; 116).

Crystal Palace), while it was a matter of pride that British manufacturing led the world in terms of output and productivity, it was a matter of regret that industrial success had not been matched by the development of good taste in matters of design. In the words of Ralph Nicholson Wornum – another associate of Cole, and the winner of the prize of 100 guineas offered by *The Art-Journal* for ‘an essay on the best mode of rendering the Exhibition practically useful to the British Manufacturer’ – the English side of the Exhibition disclosed ‘a very decided inferiority’ in taste, ‘the producer’s most valuable capital’ and ‘the capital which the English manufacturer may acquire in the Exhibition from a careful study of many foreign productions’.<sup>48</sup> With a view to remedying that national inferiority, Cole intended that the Exhibition should educate rather than further enrich his fellow countrymen. The guiding principle was that ‘the perfecting of the articles exhibited should be the primary object, and the commerce to be afterwards derived from them merely secondary’,<sup>49</sup> a principle confirmed by the Commissioners for the Exhibition, who announced when inviting proposals to build a suitable hall that it was their intention

only to have such offices as will be required for taking money at the doors, distributing tickets, selling catalogues, and conducting the other business of the Exhibition, and not offices for the sale of articles exhibited. The object of the Exhibition is the display of the articles intended to be exhibited, and not the transaction of commercial business; and the Commissioners can therefore give no facilities for the sale of articles, or for the transaction of business connected therewith.<sup>50</sup>

Once the building was open, the rules for visitors printed at the front of the official catalogue were unequivocal: ‘No article is allowed to be sold in the Building except the Official

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<sup>48</sup> Ralph Nicholson Wornum, ‘The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste: an Essay on Ornamental Art as displayed in the Industrial Exhibition in Hyde Park, in which the different styles are compared with a view to the improvement of taste in home manufactures’, in *The Art-Journal Illustrated Catalogue: The Industry of all Nations 1851* (London: George Virtue, 1851), pp. I\*\*\*-XXII\*\*\* (p. VII\*\*\*).

<sup>49</sup> Tallis’s *History and Description of the Crystal Palace, and the Exhibition of the World’s Industry in 1851; Illustrated by Beautiful Steel Engravings, from Original Drawings and Daguerreotypes* (3 vols) (London: John Tallis and Co., 1852), vol. I, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Industrial Exhibition of 1851’, *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 16, no. 418 (23 March 1850), p. 186.

Catalogues, the Medals struck at the press, refreshments, and bouquets of flowers.’<sup>51</sup> That conception of the Exhibition as an educational opportunity, a means to teach ‘lessons in artistic taste’,<sup>52</sup> was enthusiastically supported in the press. *The Morning Chronicle*, for example, which maintained that ‘even a dinner-plate may have its social value. A man is a better citizen who is not surrounded by household barbarisms and solecisms. It is a national gain to educate the national taste’,<sup>53</sup> stated in a leading article that the Exhibition displayed ‘a very disheartening and unpleasant characteristic [...] of our nation’, that in England, ‘almost for the first time in the history of civilization, we are actually living without any fixed principles of beauty or taste’.

The very greatest work which the Exhibition can achieve—one which it is very likely to achieve, if rightly read—one for which, among its many high purposes, we gratefully hail it—is that of giving us a decided and acknowledged national taste [...].<sup>54</sup>

*Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* considered that

during the last quarter of a century, intercourse with the Continent has tended very materially to elevate English taste, both in the combination of colour and in elegance of design. Yet even the most superficial inspection of the walls and shelves of the Exhibition suffices to convince one how much our public has yet to learn, and how little they really understand of refinement in taste. If in these respects alone an upward tendency may be given to the energies and application of the people, the present outlay and labour will be amply repaid[.]<sup>55</sup>

while *The Times* went further, urging that the Exhibition be made a part of the school curriculum:

Our industrial classes have risen to importance unaided by the taste and refinement which instruction imparts, and at this moment there is no greater want felt among us than that which arises from our deficiency in designs. The productive energy is strong, but the power which rests in the imagination—which gives grace to form, and purity and harmony to colour, is too often wanting. Whence does this arise, and would it be so much the case if our great metropolitan schools had an opportunity afforded

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<sup>51</sup> *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851* (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *The Times*, no. 20842 (July 1 1851), p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26451 (September 24 1851), p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26386 (July 8 1851), p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 209 (May 1851), pp. 261-66 (p. 263).

them of seeing the grandeur of the peaceful arts, of estimating material industry by a correct standard, and of observing how in each department human ingenuity had pushed its way, little aided by learning, and owing its chief impulses to the strong action of necessity and the sterling qualities of the national intellect?<sup>56</sup>

The principal focus of Basil's account of Mr Sherwin's drawing room is the glaring gaudiness of its colour scheme, and – as the articles just quoted suggest – inharmonious colouring was among the most notable of the defects of taste apparent in the British manufactures on display at the Great Exhibition. Owen Jones said in a paper read to the Society of Arts in April 1852 that the Exhibition had shown that in the employment of colour, Britain was 'behind some of our European neighbours' (albeit all European nations 'were far outstripped by the nations of the East').<sup>57</sup> Commentators on the Exhibition in the press also suggested that a faulty sense of colour was a national characteristic. In the view of *The Times*, Britain's exhibits afforded 'multiplied evidences of neglected taste, [...] violations of harmony in colour and design that must shock many of our visitors',<sup>58</sup> and *The Morning Chronicle* made the point in trenchantly nationalistic terms:

It has often been a source of regret that in certain manufactures, in spite of all the endeavours of our artisans, they could never equal some of their foreign rivals. For example, [...] to a great extent, the French surpass us [...] in those cases where beauty of form is combined with appropriate and harmonious colouring. [...] There are multitudes of examples in the Great Exhibition, of manufactures from people whom, both in a moral and in a political point of view, we consider inferior to ourselves; but which manufactures, in configuration and colour, completely throw into shade the richest and most elaborate productions of our own industry.<sup>59</sup>

*The Literary Gazette* opined that 'By some accident of nature, or fault of education, the English eye is not so adjusted as to appreciate chromatic harmony',<sup>60</sup> while one visitor,

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<sup>56</sup> 'The Great Exhibition', *The Times*, no. 20795 (May 7 1851), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Owen Jones, *An Attempt to Define the Principles Which Should Regulate the Employment of Colour in the Decorative Arts, with a Few Words on the Present Necessity of an Architectural Education on the Part of the Public. Read before the Society of Arts, April 28, 1852* (London: [no publisher stated], 1852), p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> 'The Great Exhibition', *The Times*, no. 20802 (May 15 1851), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Great Exhibition', *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26333 (May 7 1851), pp. 2-3 (p. 2).

<sup>60</sup> 'The Great Exhibition', *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1791 (May 17 1851), pp. 347-48 (p. 347).

writing in *The Art-Journal*, declared that

A cursory view of the Exhibition served to convince me that I had not over-rated the defect in the English eye for colour. [...] What makes the matter hopeless is, that the public appear as little sensitive of the defect as the manufacturers.<sup>61</sup>

They developed their theme in the next issue:

To return to the subject of colour. [...] I must repeat my conviction that in England this is a wide-spread national defect—perhaps an organic one. While I was meditating upon it a lady came and sat down by me. She had on a bright green satin gown, a dark red velvet paletôt, a sky-blue handkerchief round the neck, and a yellow bonnet; or *vice versâ*, I forget which. Looking at this dreadful war of colours in so small a compass, I was struck with despondency, and inwardly ejaculated—“What can be expected, in a country where such outrages on the eye are tolerated? What Frenchwoman would dare to afflict the public with such a spectacle?”<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, *The Art-Journal* devoted eight pages of its illustrated catalogue of the Exhibition to an essay by Mary Merrifield on ‘The Harmony of Colours, as exemplified in the Exhibition’, whose opening paragraphs observed that

When the impressions of wonder and delight, which we feel on the first view of the interior of the Crystal Palace, have passed away, and the mind becomes capable of attending to details, we are sensible of a more pleasing and tasteful arrangement of colours in that part of the building appropriated to foreigners, than in the department assigned to the exhibition of native and American productions. [...]

Excellent as the English have proved themselves to be, not only in the sciences but in the arts, it is universally, although reluctantly, admitted that in the arrangement of colours they are not equal to their continental neighbours.<sup>63</sup>

Commentators particularly criticised the ‘trophy’ of Spitalfields silks

hung with the richest silk damasks, brocatelles, tabarets, &c., to the height of upwards of fifty feet; the sides of the base being filled in with mirrors of the largest dimensions, reflecting, at certain angles, the draped arrangement, and surmounted by flags and a banner, the central one being emblazoned with the Royal arms<sup>64</sup>

that was positioned in the nave of the building, at the entrance to the British Department

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Wanderings in the Crystal Palace’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 156 (June 1 1851), pp. 180-81 (p. 181).

<sup>62</sup> S. A., ‘Wanderings in the Crystal Palace.—No. II’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 157 (July 1 1851), pp. 197-98 (p. 197).

<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Merrifield, ‘The Harmony of Colours, as exemplified in the Exhibition’, in *The Art-Journal Illustrated Catalogue: The Industry of all Nations 1851* (London: George Virtue, 1851), pp. I‡-VIII‡ (p. I‡).

<sup>64</sup> ‘A Guide to the Great Exhibition of Industry’, Exhibition Supplement to *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 18, no. 482 (May 3 1851), pp. 359-74 (p. 364).

(figure 2.3). For the visitor writing in *The Art-Journal*, the silks trophy was ‘[a]nother proof



Figure 2.3: After John McNevin, *The British Department, Viewed from the Transept* (1851), coloured lithograph, 30 × 46 cm (Image © London Metropolitan Archives (City of London)).

of want of taste in the juxtaposition of colours, so called [...]. Can anything be more [...] wanting in harmony and relief than the colours?’<sup>65</sup> while *The Literary Gazette* considered that ‘in the arrangements of [these silks] around this screen, we have nothing like the happy blend of colour which is exhibited [...] in the display of silks from France and Italy.’<sup>66</sup> Some described the trophy in terms strikingly similar to those in which Basil describes Mr Sherwin’s drawing room at North Villa. In Mary Merrifield’s view, it was

very defective in harmonious arrangement, and the defects are rendered more apparent by its prominent situation. In the first place the colours are all bright and positive, and the eye finds no neutral or quiet hues on which to repose. In the second

<sup>65</sup> ‘Wanderings in the Crystal Palace’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 156 (June 1 1851), pp. 180-81 (p. 181).

<sup>66</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1791 (May 17 1851), pp. 347-48 (p. 347).

place, the arrangement itself is bad; for we have the disagreeable impression of light blue next to crimson.<sup>67</sup>

The most prominent features of the comfortless decorative scheme whose ‘gaudy’, ‘showy’ colouring glares on Basil and makes his eye ache are the wallpaper, the fabrics of the window-curtains and the chintz-covers, and the carpet. Examples of all these items in the British Department of the Exhibition were condemned on the ground of their lack of taste, particularly with regard to colour. One commentator, for example, deplored the fact that ‘in the selection and arrangement of colours, we are excelled [...] in [...] paper hangings from Paris’,<sup>68</sup> while another described a domestic manufacturer’s printed fabrics as ‘far too glaring. [...] [W]e could wish that more taste was brought to bear upon their production’.<sup>69</sup> When it came to carpets – of which *The Art-Journal*’s waspish visitor wrote that ‘I hear there are some well-coloured English carpets. I can only say I was not so fortunate as to see one’<sup>70</sup> – R. N. Wornum saw ‘much that is staring and inconsistent’<sup>71</sup> and Mary Merrifield many ‘harsh and discordant’ examples, concluding that as a class they were ‘justly charged with an inharmonious arrangement of colours’,<sup>72</sup> while *The Times* bemoaned their ‘lavish expenditure of colours’ in ‘broad and startling contrasts’ and anticipated Basil’s distress by predicting that a viewer of them would ‘find his eyes dazzled and perplexed’ by designs ‘that give him a headache with their brightness’.<sup>73</sup> The sternest critic of all was Richard Redgrave, who was directed by the Commissioners for the Exhibition to prepare a report on ‘the general state of design as applied to the various fabrics and manufactures in the Great Exhibition’. Concerned

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<sup>67</sup> Merrifield, ‘The Harmony of Colours, as exemplified in the Exhibition’, p. I‡.

<sup>68</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *The Times*, no. 20822 (June 7 1851), p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26457 (October 1 1851), p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Wanderings in the Crystal Palace’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 156 (June 1 1851), pp. 180-81 (p. 181).

<sup>71</sup> Wornum, ‘The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste’, p. VIII\*\*\*.

<sup>72</sup> Merrifield, ‘The Harmony of Colours, as exemplified in the Exhibition’, pp. V‡-VI‡.

<sup>73</sup> ‘The Great Exhibition’, *The Times*, no. 20842 (July 1 1851), p. 5.

lest the public taste ‘will rather be vitiated than improved by an examination of the Exhibition’, in which the mass of ornament applied to the works on display was more appropriately deemed meretricious rather than beautiful, ‘and from that very cause more likely to impose on the uninformed taste of the multitude’, Redgrave proposed in his report, dated November 1851 and published the next year under the title ‘Supplementary Report on Design’, to offer ‘some critical guidance, some judicial canons’ of taste, seeking

to declare the general principles, as far as they can be arrived at, which ought to govern the design and ornamentation of any fabric, to indicate prevailing errors and false taste, and to allude sparingly to such works of merit as seem wholly or largely composed with good taste and on sound principles.

He proceeded to identify the ways in which the majority of exhibits, attractive only to those – no doubt like Mr Sherwin – ‘for whom good taste is not piquant enough, [...] who think novelty better than chaste design, and show preferable to truth’, departed from ‘just taste and true principles’. Papers and other hangings for walls were ‘mostly florid and gaudy compositions, consisting of architectural ornament in relief, with imitative flowers and foliage’; some English wallpapers, indeed, displayed ‘a style of ornamentation [...] of the most depraved kind’, in which

excellence is reckoned rather by the number of colours than any other quality [...], the works themselves evidencing the absence of all knowledge of the effective arrangement of colour; while violent, crude, and harsh tints are too often used to give greater impression of this *excellence!*

Mr Sherwin’s wallpaper, with its ‘gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground’, could hardly have escaped Redgrave’s censure. Nor could his ‘showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue’: according to the Supplementary Report on Design, ‘flatness of treatment and subdued contrasts of colour’ were the only sure guides for curtains. The ‘flaring chintz-covers’ on the chairs at North Villa were no less contrary to the true principles for such fabrics, whose ‘decoration seems at present to be of the most extravagant kind’, than which ‘[n]othing can be more erroneous, or more essentially vulgar’:

[T]he taste is to cover the surface almost entirely with large and coarse flowers—dahlias, hollyhocks, roses, hydrangeas—or others which give scope for strong and vivid colouring [...].

[...] [I]t is scarcely possible in such distributions of colours [...] to arrange them according to just or scientific laws [...].

As for Mr Sherwin's 'still showier carpet of red and yellow', like many 'bright and gaudy'

English carpets in the Exhibition, it too broke the laws laid down by Redgrave:

As a field for other objects, the attention should hardly be called to carpets by [...] violent contrasts of light and dark, or colour: but graduated shades of the same colour, or a distribution of colours nearly equal in scale of light and dark, should be adopted; secondaries and tertiaries, or neutralized primaries, being used rather than pure tints.<sup>74</sup>

Following the closure of the Exhibition, a committee including Cole, Redgrave, and Owen Jones – 'the Triumvirate of Taste'<sup>75</sup> – was appointed by the government to continue its educational function by purchasing items from the Crystal Palace for display in a new Museum of Ornamental Art, superintended by Cole and Redgrave and housed in the premises of the Department of Practical Art in Marlborough House, Pall Mall. (The Department occupied the basement and the second and third floors of Marlborough House; the museum took up what had been the lower bedrooms, and the lecture theatre was in the former kitchen, 'where ladies [sit] on the gridirons, whilst lecturers venture to criticise the taste of garments which they wear'.)<sup>76</sup> The committee spent some of the £5,000 granted for the purpose on the acquisition of items to be displayed in an ante-room

fitted up as a sort of "chamber of horrors," with a collection of all kinds of so-called ornamental manufacture, which are considered to exhibit false principles of decoration, such as vulgar and inharmonious colouring, want of meaning and unity in

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<sup>74</sup> Richard Redgrave, 'Class XXX. Supplementary Report on Design', in *Exhibition of the Works of All Nations, 1851: Reports of the Juries on the Subjects in the Thirty Classes into which the Exhibition was Divided* (London: The Royal Commission, 1852), pp. 708-49 (pp. 708; 712; 710; 718-19; 729; 730; 727).

<sup>75</sup> Argus (Frederic James Prouting), *To Manufacturers, Decorators, Designers, and the Public generally. A Mild Remonstrance Against the Taste-Censorship at Marlborough House, in reference to Manufacturing Ornamentation and Decorative Design* (3 parts) (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1853), Part the First, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Henry Cole, 'On the Facilities Afforded to All Classes of the Community for Obtaining Education in Art', in *Addresses of the Superintendents of the Department of Practical Art, Delivered in the Theatre at Marlborough House* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1853), pp. 3-38 (p. 24).

patterns, graceless imitations of natural forms, &c.<sup>77</sup>

Exhibits 1-9 in that ‘Gallery of False Principles’, whose catalogue quoted so extensively from the Supplementary Report on Design that one hostile pamphleteer called Redgrave’s report ‘the first instance on record of a book becoming an established authority within three months after its publication; and so high an authority, too, that its very Author has no sense of the indecency of quoting it on all occasions himself!’<sup>78</sup> were carpets, selected on such grounds as ‘inharmonious colouring’; exhibits 10-20 were chintzes, of which nos. 10, 11, and 12, condemned for displaying ‘General gaudiness and want of repose’, remain identifiable in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the successor to the Museum of Ornamental Art (figure 2.4);



Figure 2.4: Museum of Ornamental Art, Gallery of False Principles, exhibits 10 (left), 11 (centre), and 12 (right) (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accession numbers T.8-1933, T.10-1933, T.11-1933) (Images © Victoria and Albert Museum).

exhibits 21-36 were wallpapers, of which no. 22 earned its place in the gallery for its ‘vulgar

<sup>77</sup> ‘Museum of Ornamental Art’, *The Times*, no. 21213 (September 6 1852), p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Prouting, *A Mild Remonstrance Against the Taste-Censorship at Marlborough House*, Part the First, p. 32. The jibe was unfair: Henry Cole, rather than Redgrave, was the author of the catalogue (see Elizabeth Bonnyton and Anthony Burton, *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole* (London: V and A Publications, 2003), p. 154).

colour', and nos. 33 and 34 for having 'No sense of harmony in the distribution of colour'.<sup>79</sup> Shortly after it opened in September 1852, Cole's and Redgrave's 'chamber of horrors' was satirised in a story by Henry Morley published in Charles Dickens's *Household Words*. Mr Crumpet, of Clump Lodge, Brixton, is a 'very miserable man', and has been for five weeks, since he 'acquired some Correct Principles of Taste':

Five weeks ago, I went to the Department of Practical Art in Marlborough House, to look over the museum of ornamental art. I had heard of a Chamber of Horrors there established, and I found it, and went through it with my catalogue. It was a gloomy chamber, hung round with frightful objects, in curtains, carpets, clothes, lamps, and what not. In each case the catalogue told me why such and such a thing wasn't enduring; and I found in the same place also on equally good authority, in black and white, a few hints of what the correct principles of decoration are in each class of ornamental art. I could have cried, sir. I was ashamed of the pattern of my own trowsers, for I saw a piece of them hung up there as a horror. [...] I saw it all; when I went home I found that I had been living among horrors up to that hour. The paper in my parlour contains four kinds of bird of paradise, besides bridges and pagodas.

It is not only the paper in Mr Crumpet's parlour that seems to echo Basil's description of the drawing room at North Villa; every time he comes home, 'a dozen hideous forms glare at me in the hall', and when he lights his camphine lamp, 'it glares upon me in the shape of something evil'. Capturing something of the evangelical fervour with which the catalogue of the Gallery of False Principles promulgated the rules taught by Cole and Redgrave, Morley has Mr Crumpet parrot their doctrine when he visits his friends Mr and Mrs Frippy, the 'inharmonious and bad' colouring of whose wallpaper is 'in constant violence to the principles by which [the designer] should be guided':

The ornament upon your paper, whether full and rich, or light and elegant, ought to be subdued in character, presenting no strong contrasts in colour, and if it be not composed of several tints of the same colour, but of several colours absolutely different, the greatest pains must be taken to assure the nice adjustment of the proportions, and to prevent anything from staring out to catch the eye. I am

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<sup>79</sup> Department of Practical Art, *Appendix to a Catalogue of the Articles of Ornamental Art, in the Museum of the Department, For the Use of Students and Manufacturers, and the Consultation of the Public*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1852), Appendix (C), 'Examples of False Principles in Decoration', pp. 23; 25; 26-27.

perpetually grieved by rooms, papered as this is, in which we now are sitting.<sup>80</sup>

Although Collins's account of Mr Sherwin's bad taste was written before Morley's satire, and, indeed, before Redgrave's Supplementary Report on Design, the 'Correct Principles of Taste' that Cole and Redgrave sought to promote through the Great Exhibition and thereafter through the Museum of Ornamental Art had been propounded by them for some time before 1851, particularly in *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, the periodical that Cole founded in 1849 and edited until its closure in 1852. The parallels of language and tone between the Supplementary Report on Design and the catalogue of the Gallery of False Principles on the one hand and Collins's description of the drawing room at North Villa on the other are no less striking than those between the latter and *The Journal of Design*: not only does Basil's disdain for Mr Sherwin's 'over-ornamented chiffoniers', for example, reflect such pronouncements by Cole and his editorial colleagues as that ornament is 'pleasing to us only when it is sparingly used,'<sup>81</sup> or that 'Excess of ornament [...] debauches the simplicity of true taste',<sup>82</sup> or that 'The very best things in the Exhibition are the least ornamented',<sup>83</sup> but it was a very frequently repeated theme in *The Journal of Design* that 'The want of an eye for harmonious and graceful combinations [of colour] has too long formed a deficiency in our artisans',<sup>84</sup> with its reviewers' castigation of 'those combinations of colour that so frequently occur in the manufactures and art [...] of the present day' as

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<sup>80</sup> [Henry Morley], 'A House Full of Horrors', *Household Words*, vol. 6, no. 141 (December 4 1852), pp. 265-70 (pp. 265-66; 269).

<sup>81</sup> 'On Ornament, especially referring to Woven Fabrics', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1849), pp. 56-58 (p. 57).

<sup>82</sup> 'A Warning on the French Exposition in London', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 2, no. 11 (January 1850), pp. 158-68 (p. 160).

<sup>83</sup> 'Universal Infidelity in Principles of Design', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 5, no. 30 (August 1851), pp. 158-61 (p. 158).

<sup>84</sup> 'Paper-Hangings', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1849), pp. 50-51 (p. 50).

‘glaringly vulgar’<sup>85</sup> or of ‘inharmonious combinations and false contrasts’ of colour as a sign of ‘vulgarity and false taste’<sup>86</sup> seeming to find a particularly clear echo in Basil’s account of Mr Sherwin’s glaringly inharmonious and unquestionably vulgar *décor*. The preface to the first volume of *The Journal of Design* announced that ‘We believe that the manufacturer and student of design will find throughout our pages something like a systematic attempt to establish recognised principles’,<sup>87</sup> and month after month ‘the doctrinal part of our Journal’ laid down the rules that would subsequently be repeated in the Supplementary Report on Design and then in the catalogue of the Gallery of False Principles in an untiring effort ‘to present to the designer treatises developing sound principles of ornamental art’.<sup>88</sup> In September 1850, for example, Cole reprinted a speech given by Redgrave to the Society of Arts, characteristically titled ‘Canons of Taste in Carpets, Paper-Hangings, and Glass’, whose ‘hints’ – including such precepts as that in carpets ‘the colours should be without violence either in hue or in contrast, that they may not intrude upon the eye’, while in paper-hangings the contrasts should not be ‘violent, the colour crude or ill-chosen’ – the speaker hoped might ‘save us from many errors’ of taste.<sup>89</sup> That bad taste is an ‘error’ is a recurrent theme in *The Journal of Design*. The second issue contained an article on ornament that amounted to a general manifesto:

Design has a twofold relation, having, in the first place, a strict reference to utility in the thing designed; and, secondarily, to the beautifying or ornamenting that utility. The word *design*, however, with the many has become identified rather with its secondary than with its whole signification—with ornament, as apart from, and often even as opposed to, utility. From thus confounding that which is in itself but an addition, with that which is essential, has arisen many of those great errors in *taste*

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Hints on the Arrangement of Colours in Ancient Decorative Art’, *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 2, no. 10 (December 1849), pp. 139-41 (p. 140).

<sup>86</sup> ‘Counsel to Designers for Woven Fabrics’, *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 3, no. 18 (August 1850), pp. 179-82 (p. 179).

<sup>87</sup> ‘Preface to volume I’, *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1 (March-August 1849), pp. vii-viii (p. viii).

<sup>88</sup> ‘Address’, *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1849), pp. 1-4 (p. 3).

<sup>89</sup> ‘Canons of Taste in Carpets, Paper-Hangings, and Glass’, *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 4, no. 19 (September 1850), pp. 14-16 (p. 15).

which are observable in the works of modern designers. These errors, by vitiating the taste of the public, react upon the artist, until both have arrived at such a state of diseased judgment, that the simplicity of truth and propriety would hardly be endured, however well presented; and the many have come to love gaudy extravagance in lieu of simple, earnest ornamental art.<sup>90</sup>

The language is remarkable: designers' 'errors in *taste*' – transgressions of the 'sound principles of ornamental art' – corrupt the public; they result in 'a state of diseased judgment' in which neither artist nor public can endure 'the simplicity of truth and propriety'. Like Richard Redgrave in the Supplementary Report on Design, praising the 'justness and truth' of the manner in which colour is applied to Indian and Turkish carpets while condemning the meretricious attractions of French carpets designed 'in total contravention of those laws which have been presumed to be just ones for such a purpose', on the ground that those attractions 'only increase the evil such designs foster',<sup>91</sup> the anonymous author of this article expresses their critical opinions in terms that go considerably beyond the conventional vocabulary of aesthetic judgement. This is the language, not of taste, but of morality, of ethics rather than aesthetics.

For Henry Cole and his associates, taste was indeed an ethical issue. The first page of the first issue of *The Journal of Design* pronounced that 'While the *commercial* value of ornamental design now comes home practically to the perception of tens of thousands, [...] the *moral* influence of ornamental art extends to millions',<sup>92</sup> and Cole had no doubt that the canons of taste that he sought to promulgate were as fixed and immutable as the canons of morality. In the words of *The Journal of Design*:

All know the maxim of "EVERY ONE TO THEIR TASTE," and a very foolish, false maxim it is. We might as well insist upon every one's right to being the absolute arbiter of their own morals. Taste has its principles and is founded upon knowledge,

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<sup>90</sup> 'On Ornament, especially referring to Woven Fabrics', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1849), pp. 56-58 (p. 56).

<sup>91</sup> Redgrave, 'Class XXX. Supplementary Report on Design', pp. 729; 727.

<sup>92</sup> 'Address', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1849), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

just like morals or any other subject of human science.<sup>93</sup>

It was a message that Cole repeated in the valedictory preface to the final volume of his periodical ('It was [...] the aim of the JOURNAL [...] to lose no occasion of denouncing the spurious freedom involved in the fallacy of "Every one to his own taste"'),<sup>94</sup> and one that he expounded at every opportunity. Giving evidence in May 1849 to a select committee of the House of Commons appointed to consider the constitution and management of the Government School of Design, he was asked what would happen if a difference of opinion arose among the head masters of the school upon a question of taste. His answer was unequivocal: 'I do not think it possible to arise upon a question of taste; taste has its principles as well as morals, which people understand and know.' A few minutes later, another member of the committee returned to the topic:

We have a proverb about doctors, and I think experience shows that doctors in taste differ as much as doctors in medicine?—I do not agree in that; I think to act upon the principle of "every one to his taste," would be as mischievous as "every one to his morals;" and I think there are certain principles in taste which all eminent artists are agreed upon in all parts of the world.

Cole seized a chance to revisit the subject the next day, when a question was put to him premised on 'the fallibility of artists in matters of taste':

I do not admit the fallibility in such matters of taste. I think taste has certain broad rules, like all other mundane subjects. People who attend to the matter can understand those rules, and arrive at conclusions which are generally the same.

Since the world began all people have differed on matters of taste?—"Every one to their taste" is, I think, a mischievous, though a popular fallacy.<sup>95</sup>

Cole was surely the inspiration for, and very likely the author of, the leading article in *The Morning Chronicle* that pronounced at the time of the Great Exhibition that 'almost for the

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<sup>93</sup> 'Miscellaneous', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 2, no. 9 (November 1850), pp. 116-20 (p. 119).

<sup>94</sup> 'Preface', *The Journal of Design and Manufactures*, vol. 6 (September 1851-February 1852), pp. iii-iv (p. iii).

<sup>95</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on the School of Design; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1849), p. 163, paras 1893; 1899; p. 194, paras 2080-2081.

first time in the history of civilization, we are actually living without any fixed principles of beauty or taste’, and went on to contend that

What we want are canons of taste—laws of beauty—principles and axioms of propriety. [...] If the dining-room carpet is the transcript of the Bellerophon mosaic, in flat tessellation, ought the drawing-room carpet to present us with vases and bouquets of poppies and lilies, in all the colours and lights and shades of a Covent-garden flower-stall? May a painted window imitate a landscape by CLAUDE as legitimately as an interlaced diaper?

We are quite aware of the answer to all this—it is urged that tastes vary, and that manufacture must follow taste. But our question is, whether there is any taste in this variableness of taste—whether taste ought so to vary—whether, if its rules were discovered, or rather elucidated, taste is not as fixed a thing as truth—whether beauty has not laws. It cannot be that æsthetics, to use the hard word of the day, which covets so much ignorance and falseness—is only “what I like,” as HORNE TOOKE said that “truth was only what the individual troweth.” [...] [W]hat we urge is, that art has its dogmas and its orthodoxy, which are as severe as any other axioms[.]<sup>96</sup>

and he restated his position in a lecture delivered as General Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art in November 1852:

[I]t is a national conviction, that the surest road to the formation of right opinions is through good education. General education, as the best means of making us religious and right-minded in morals and politics, is now fully admitted, although the system for affording it may be carried out imperfectly. Thinking men seem to be convinced, that an elevated public taste, like sound morals, is only to be accepted through education. At last we are beginning to be sceptical of the soundness of the old proverb, “Every man to his own taste,” as though this taste were a property, where each one, whether wise or foolish, whether actually blind or having eyes that cannot see, was free to settle the boundaries.<sup>97</sup>

In much the same vein, R. N. Wornum wrote that it was the ‘chief aim’ of his prize-winning essay on the Great Exhibition to demonstrate the truth that ‘Taste [...] is not a mere impulse of the fancy, but dependent upon the operation of reason as completely as any other conclusion respecting good or bad, or right or wrong, to which we attain by the mind’s experience’.<sup>98</sup> For Owen Jones, lecturing on ‘The True and the False in the Decorative Arts’ at Marlborough House in June 1852, not only did taste, like morality, have its principles, but

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<sup>96</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26386 (July 8 1851), p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Cole, ‘On the Facilities Afforded to All Classes of the Community for Obtaining Education in Art’, p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> Wornum, ‘The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste’, p. I\*\*\*.

a contravention of the principles of taste was equivalent to a contravention of the principles of morality. Those who perpetrated and promulgated errors in design should

remember, that the evil which men do lives after them. [...] [A] man may do as much harm to society by building a house in bad taste, decorating a shop with unsightly sign-boards and filling its windows with productions vicious in form and colour, as by openly violating some at least of the laws which society has established for regulating the morals

– so much so, indeed, that ‘A few thousands spent in forming art-museums accessible to all, would save many thousands more from being spent in building gaoles’. Just as the advocates of sanitary reform called on the nation to ‘put[..] a stop to those fearful evils of filth, and consequent misery, degradation, and crime, which must else increase upon us and destroy at once the elevation of the British character and the prosperity of the country’, so Jones urged his audience to embark upon the process of design reform. Even ‘the highest in the land cannot, and do not, escape the influence of the spread of bad taste’; they must protect the moral health of their children, ‘the rising generation (to whom the future destinies of this great country will one day be committed)’, by eliminating the plague of ugliness from their homes:

Reform must begin in your nurseries; all those hideous papers which decorate your nursery walls, and those ungainly toys, which serve to amuse your children but educate them *downwards*, must at once be banished. The moral influences in childhood are well known as the most lasting; many men through life have but little more of faith than the remnant of what they gained upon their mothers’ knees, which the friction of their school-days and after-life may enfeeble, but can never thoroughly eradicate.<sup>99</sup>

Against that background, Mr Sherwin’s bad taste is an indicator of a defective sense of ethics as much as of a defective sense of colour. As Collins was to write less than two years later in *Hide and Seek*, ‘Rooms have their mysterious peculiarities of physiognomy as well as men

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<sup>99</sup> Owen Jones, *On the True and the False in the Decorative Arts: Lectures Delivered at Marlborough House, June 1852* (London: [no publisher stated], 1863), pp. 73; 108; 71-72; 76-77.

[...], reflecting the various characters of their inhabitants by [...] fine varieties of effect in the furniture-features generally common to all',<sup>100</sup> and in a more astute observer than Basil the decorative scheme of Mr Sherwin's drawing room might be expected to give rise not merely to visual distress but to doubts about the moral character of its occupant. When Collins causes Mr Sherwin to praise the 'chaste style' in which the furniture and hangings are arranged in Basil's family's town residence (vol. I, p. 203), his use of the word 'chaste' – a term frequently used by contemporaries in a figurative sense, to commend simplicity of design or ornament: Richard Redgrave, for example, hoped that the Great Exhibition would 'lead men to the appreciation of the simple and the chaste as the true source of the beautiful',<sup>101</sup> – is doubly ironic: not only is Mr Sherwin's own *décor* very obviously not 'chaste' in that figurative sense, but a man who can furnish his home in such bad taste is more than capable of bringing up a daughter who proves to be far from chaste in the true sense of the word.<sup>102</sup>

Soon after its first publication, Basil's description of Mr Sherwin's room was reprinted in a popular women's magazine as a stand-alone piece of bravura writing,<sup>103</sup> and modern critics

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<sup>100</sup> Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol. I, pp. 6-7.

<sup>101</sup> Redgrave, 'Class XXX. Supplementary Report on Design', p. 712.

<sup>102</sup> It seems unlikely that the argument that Mr Sherwin's bad taste indicates a defective sense of ethics would meet with unanimous scholarly agreement. William Marshall, for example, takes a very different view, writing that the drawing room at North Villa expresses 'the morality of the Victorian middle class' and stands for 'a view of life founded upon a simplistic morality and expressed through a discordant esthetic' (William H. Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York: Twayne, 1970), p. 33). Anthea Trodd suggests that it exemplifies 'suburban respectability'; marked by 'cosiness, openness and intimacy', it is 'an ordinary room', whose middle-class inhabitants are attempting 'to achieve the perfect domestic interior' (Anthea Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 101-102), and Alison Milbank also identifies the principal characteristic of North Villa as 'respectability' (Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 49).

<sup>103</sup> 'A Room to be Avoided', *The New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, vol. 38 (March 1853), pp. 161-62; it was also reprinted in *The Leader* ('A "Genteel" Drawing-Room', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 148 (January 22 1853), p. 94), one of a large number of passages from *Basil* that were excerpted in that paper, with which – as is discussed in chapter 4 below – Collins was closely associated at the time (see 'Love and Ambition'; 'Margaret's Education'; 'The Pride of Birth'; 'After the Wedding'; 'A Gallop in the Rain', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 145 (January 1 1853), pp. 14; 15; 22; 'Mentor and Mistress', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 146 (January 8 1853), p. 35; 'Before the Wedding'; 'A la mode Française'; 'The First Kiss', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 147 (January 15 1853), pp. 63; 70; 'Morning in London'; 'A Girl to Love', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 150 (February 5 1853), pp. 136; 143; 'A Living Picture', *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 152 (February 19 1853), p. 190; 'The King of the Counter', *The Leader*, vol. 4,

have also tended to discuss it in isolation, divorced from its wider context in the novel. In fact, however, it is not just a ‘bit of “still life”’, but the background to the no less detailed portrait of its occupant that immediately follows:

Another violent crack from the new door, announced the entrance of Mr. Sherwin himself.

He was a tall, thin, man: rather round-shouldered; weak at the knees, and trying to conceal the weakness in the breadth of his trousers. He wore a white cravat, and an absurdly high shirt collar. His complexion was sallow; his eyes were small, black, bright, and incessantly in motion—indeed, all his features were singularly mobile: they were affected by nervous contractions and spasms which were constantly drawing up and down in all directions the brow, the mouth, and the muscles of the cheek. His hair had been black, but was now turning to a sort of iron-grey; it was very dry, wiry, and plentiful, and part of it projected almost horizontally over his forehead. He had a habit of stretching it in this direction, by irritably combing it out, from time to time, with his fingers. His lips were thin and colourless, the lines about them being numerous and strongly-marked (vol. I, pp. 200-201).

A matrix of equally pictorial descriptions then connects that portrait of Mr Sherwin in his room to a subsequent portrait of Robert Mannion in his. The portrait of the man, ‘dressed as unobtrusively as possible, entirely in black; and [...] rather above the middle height’ (vol. II, p. 28), comes first:

If extraordinary regularity of feature were alone sufficient to make a handsome man, then this confidential clerk of Mr. Sherwin’s was assuredly one of the handsomest men I ever beheld. Viewed separately from the head (which was rather large, both in front and behind) his face exhibited, throughout, an almost perfect symmetry of proportion. His bald forehead was smooth and massive as marble; his high brow and thin eyelid had the firmness and immobility of marble, and seemed as cold; his delicately-formed lips, when he was not speaking, closed habitually, as changelessly still as if no breath of life ever passed them. There was not a wrinkle or line anywhere on his face. But for the baldness in front, and the greyness of the hair at the back and sides of his head, it would have been impossible from his appearance to have guessed his age, even within ten years of what it really was (vol. II, pp. 25-26).

Then, when Basil comes to depict Mannion’s apartment a few pages later, paying the same attention to colour and detail as in his account of Mr Sherwin’s drawing room, he explicitly cross-references his descriptions not only of Mr Sherwin’s and Mannion’s appearances but

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no. 157 (March 26 1853), p. 302; ‘A Heart-Tragedy’, *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 166 (May 28 1853), p. 522; ‘The Hidden Life’, *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 167 (June 4 1853), p. 545).

also of their respective domestic environments:

The personal contrast between Mr. Sherwin and his clerk was remarkable enough, but the contrast between the dimensions and furnishing of the rooms they lived in, was to the full as extraordinary. The apartment I now surveyed was less than half the size of the sitting-room at North Villa. The paper on the walls was of a dark red; the curtains were of the same colour; the carpet was brown, and if it bore any pattern, that pattern was too quiet and unpretending to be visible by candle-light. One wall was entirely occupied by rows of dark mahogany shelves, completely filled with books, most of them cheap editions of the classical works of ancient and modern literature. The opposite wall was thickly hung with engravings in maple-wood frames from the works of modern painters, English and French. All the minor articles of furniture were of the plainest and neatest order—even the white china tea-pot and tea-cup on the table, had neither pattern nor colouring of any kind. What a contrast was this room to the drawing-room at North Villa! (vol. II, pp. 50-51).

Basil prides himself on ‘an aptitude for discovering points of character in others’ (vol. I, p. 96); it is in order to gratify his ‘unfailing delight in studying characters of all kinds, wherever I could meet with them’ that he gets into the fatal omnibus in the first place:

I had often before ridden in omnibuses to amuse myself by observing the passengers. An omnibus has always appeared to me, to be a perambulatory exhibition-room of the eccentricities of human nature. I know not any other sphere in which persons of all classes and all temperaments are so oddly collected together, and so immediately contrasted and confronted with each other. To watch merely the different methods of getting into the vehicle and taking their seats, adopted by different people, is to study no incomplete commentary on the infinitesimal varieties of human character—as various even as the varieties of the human face. Riding in an omnibus was always, to me, like reading for the first time an entertaining book (vol. I, pp. 96-97).

It was an age in which the principles of the pseudoscience known as physiognomy – the belief that a person’s outward appearance is an indication of their inner nature – were very widely accepted. One work of 1848, dedicated to establishing the curiously specific proposition that ‘THE NOSE IS AN IMPORTANT INDEX TO CHARACTER’, started by reminding the reader that ‘physiognomy, or the form which mind gives to the features, is universally recognised’;<sup>104</sup> the distinguished doctor James Paget wrote of ‘the nearly universal popular

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<sup>104</sup> Eden Warwick (George Jabet), *Nasology: or, Hints towards a Classification of Noses* (London: Richard Bentley, 1848), pp. 5; 7.

assent to the truth of physiognomy’,<sup>105</sup> and the reviewer of a book on the subject by the artist Thomas Woolnoth published in 1852 began his notice with the discouraging words ‘Unfortunately for Mr. Woolnoth, this is not an age in which a dissertation on so very prosaic and well-worn a fact as the connexion between face and character is likely to be studied’.<sup>106</sup> And as Basil attests, there were few better places to practise physiognomy than the streets of London. James Paget confessed that he was ‘so apt to frame a notion of every man’s humour or circumstances by his looks, that I have sometimes employed myself from Charing Cross to the Royal Exchange in drawing the characters of those who have passed by me’,<sup>107</sup> while Thomas Woolnoth wrote that

[I]t may be verily believed that a man may travel from Dan to Beersheba, and yet shall not see half so much as the skilful Physiognomist in walking only from St. Paul’s to the Exchange, and that too without any travelling expences.<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, for many it was not only the face that afforded clues to character: in the course of his narrative Basil observes not only that ‘the different methods of getting into [an omnibus] and taking their seats, adopted by different people’ shed as much light on their character as do their faces but also that ‘To study the appearance of a man’s dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character’ (vol. II, p. 50), and that even a trifle such as the way a man makes his tea can assist in ‘marking points of character’ (vol. II, p. 53). In the words of an article published in December 1851,

Physiognomy is not confined to the face. The mind of man, especially when it possesses one leading characteristic, is so redundant in expression, that, like the precious ornament which ran down the beard of Aaron, even to the skirts of his

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<sup>105</sup> [James Paget], ‘Physiognomy of the Human Form’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 99, no. 198 (September 1856), pp. 452-91 (p. 456).

<sup>106</sup> [Edwin Lankester], ‘*Facts and Faces; or, the Moral Connexion between Linear and Mental Portraiture morally considered*’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1343 (July 23 1853), p. 888.

<sup>107</sup> [James Paget], ‘Physiognomy of the Human Form’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 99, no. 198 (September 1856), pp. 452-91 (p. 453).

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Woolnoth, *Facts and Faces; or, the Mutual Connexion between Linear and Mental Portraiture Morally Considered, and Pictorially Illustrated by a Series of Twenty-four Graphic Heads of all the Dispositions of the Mind; with a Dissertation on Personal Beauty, Showing What it is, and What is Mistaken for it, by a Comprehensive View of Constructive, Ornamental, and Expressive Beauty, and their Relative Importance to Each Other: also, an Essay on Complexion of Character* (London: The Author, 1852), p. 8.

garment, it brims over upon his clothes, his gait, his commonest action [...]. The fashion of a bauble or the cut of a whisker will tell more than all the features put together. The mistress of a house as often rejects a servant-maid for her flounces as she chooses her for her face.<sup>109</sup>

Basil's physiognomical expertise does not fail him in his first encounter with his prospective father-in-law. Before Mr Sherwin has said a word, Basil deduces his character from his appearance alone:

Had I seen him under ordinary circumstances, I should have set him down as a little-minded man; a small tyrant in his own way over those dependent on him; a pompous parasite to those above him—a great stickler for the conventional respectabilities of life, and a great believer in his own infallibility. But he was Margaret's father; and I was determined to be pleased with him (vol. I, pp. 201-202).

Much later, Mannion confirms the essential accuracy of that reading: 'In plain terms, I found him to be a pretty equal compound by nature, of the fool, the tyrant, and the coward' (vol. III, p. 31).

Basil's physiognomical reading of Mr Sherwin's inner nature from his outward appearance is strongly reminiscent of Collins's account – written in August or September 1851, at very much the same time as *Basil* – of a portrait in the Dulwich Picture Gallery then attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger (figure 2.5):

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<sup>109</sup> [Elizabeth Eastlake], 'Physiognomy', *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 179 (December 1851), pp. 62-91 (p. 74).



Figure 2.5: British School, c. 1570s, *Portrait of a Man*, oil on oak panel, 54.5 × 40.6 cm (arched) (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, DPG151) (Image © Trustees of the Dulwich Picture Gallery).

[W]hat a portrait! no daguerreotype ever looked more startlingly true to nature [...]. The manner in which the character of the sitter is preserved and presented in his face [...] is something almost unique. We detect, at a glance, what sort of man he was; we set him down at once for a testy, opinionated, pompous old gentleman, savage at contradiction, despotic in his household, a tremendous disciplinarian towards his grandchildren; but not without kindness—rough, hasty, irregular kindness—when he had his own way.

Collins attributes ‘this eloquence of expression, and this forcible reality of painting’ to the artist’s ‘genuine uncompromising adherence to nature; [...] his honest determination to be always true to his sitter, and always true to himself’, and continues:

What a lesson is Hans Holbein to some of our modern portrait-painters who are basking so indolently, and so complacently, in the broad sunshine of modern art!

[...] [W]hen I remember what sort of whole-length and half-length likenesses we have seen this year in our present Royal Academy Exhibition, I cannot help feeling heartily ashamed of the portrait art of England in the present day. What are our portrait painters about? have they no ambition to occupy the high places that Reynolds and Gainsborough, and Jackson, and Opie have left vacant? Does the sort of sign-painting style that they have now adopted satisfy them, because it brings them money? if it does; if they have no desire to paint *pictures* as well as *portraits*; if lords and ladies so occupy them, that they have no time to seek advice and example in their art, in this gallery for instance, why then, I have one word of counsel for young fellows who are still toiling upward from the very bottom of the Parnassus of Painting: enter, my ambitious but obscure brethren, enter the opening where the opening really is—in portraiture; men of energy and genius are pacing the other walks of art before you; the portrait-walk is vacant; some few frail men have tried it, and have strayed away, long since, into dirty little side paths, just as gold and silver, and flattery have guided them.<sup>110</sup>

Collins was here repeating the scathing criticism of Academic portraiture that he had expressed in his review of the exhibition of the Royal Academy just a few months earlier:

Of the portraits this year, taken generally, it would be most charitable to say as little as possible. They are the worst part of the exhibition. The portrait-art of England seems to be declining lower and lower—we look in vain for the simple arrangement and grand colour of the works of our early school. Both are gone; and, in their stead, we have feebly-painted ladies and gentlemen, grinning and attitudinising like so many mountebanks. [...] If this be portrait painting, how preferable are the daguerreotypes in the shop-windows!—*they* show us, at least, what the dignity and simplicity of nature really are.<sup>111</sup>

These criticisms of the portraits exhibited at the Royal Academy in the summer of 1851 highlight a further contemporary issue that is reflected in Basil's descriptions of Mr Sherwin and Robert Mannion at home. In the next chapter, it is argued that Collins was in *Basil* imitating in words an aesthetic of portraiture that was developing by way of reaction against what was perceived to be the artificiality and insincerity of the Academic style. That aesthetic

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<sup>110</sup> [W. Wilkie Collins], 'The Dulwich Gallery', *Bentley's Miscellany*, vol. 30 (October 1851), pp. 344-52 (pp. 351-52). Collins's admiration for this picture may have been inspired by his friend Holman Hunt, who wrote over half a century later that 'a portrait of a man with a stubbly white beard by Holbein' at the Dulwich Gallery 'fascinated me with its delicate painting' when a student at the Royal Academy Schools (Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, p. 54).

<sup>111</sup> [Collins], 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', p. 626.

was intended to capture 'the dignity and simplicity of nature', to represent the person portrayed in a way that was truthful rather than flatteringly idealised, and thereby to depict, and enable the viewer to see, their inner as well as their outer self. As will be seen, it was an aesthetic that was being advocated and put into practice in the summer of 1851 not only by Collins but also by a number of his friends.

### **CHAPTER 3:**

#### **‘A RIGHT READING OF THE EXTERNALS OF CHARACTER’**

This chapter argues that Basil’s verbal portraits of Mr Sherwin and Mannion in their rooms are written in imitation of a contemporary aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture that defined itself in opposition to the hackneyed conventions of the Royal Academy. That aesthetic, which sought to effect a truthful representation of the character of the sitter by means of the detailed and unidealised depiction of both their appearance and their everyday environment, is considered with reference to art criticism written in about 1851 by both Collins himself and his friend Tom Taylor, as well as to portraits of the same period by Collins’s very close friends J. E. Millais and E. M. Ward. The chapter concludes by noting that, although the accurate representation of the sitter’s expression was also a necessary element of a portrait conforming to that aesthetic, Basil is ironically unsuccessful at reading the expressions of Mannion and Margaret.

Collins’s account of the ‘Holbein’ in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, in which he contrasted that portrait, in which ‘the character of the sitter is preserved and presented in his face’, with those recently exhibited at the Royal Academy, contains echoes of an article that his friend Tom Taylor had published in *Punch* just a few weeks earlier. Purporting to address a ‘young friend and rising portrait-painter’ in the course of a visit to the loan exhibition of old masters at the British Institution, Taylor also began by effecting a physiognomical reading of character from a portrait attributed to Holbein, believed to be of Cardinal Fisher (figure 3.1):



Figure 3.1: Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, *Portrait of a Wool Merchant* (c. 1540), oil on panel, 74.3 × 57.8 cm (Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco, Museum purchase, Roscoe and Margaret Oakes Collection) (Image © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).

[F]irst, my dear young portrait-painter, let me introduce you to HOLBEIN, here. This is CARDINAL FISHER. [...] There—what do you say to this masterpiece of hard-hitting, straightforward, determined mastery in portraiture? Is there any mistake about the man there? Is there any thought possible, while looking at that picture, of anything but the man on the panel before you, strong of purpose, ruthless of will, scornful of scruples, with a hold on his inferior clergy as firm as that gripe of the Cardinal's cap in his hand?

Then Taylor turned to a series of portraits by Rembrandt:

I think, my dear young friend, that in the dozen heads by this master [...], there is a rather remarkable absence of manner. It is curious, one can always recognise the broad handling of our own DABSTER, R. A. One never misses the same spot of light

on the tip of every nose,—the same snuffy smear on every upper lip,—the same Indian red-brown shadows on one side of every face,—the same dashing landscape of every background. Whoever encounters a canvass from that elegant and gentlemanly creature, FLIMSY, A.R.A., that he doesn't say, at the first glance, "Ah, that's FLIMSY!"—seeing in every frame FLIMSY always, and his original never, except as quite an accessory. [...]

And now, with the performance of DABSTER, FLIMSY, & CO., in your mind's eye, look at these REMBRANDTS. Take that old man's head [...], the wear and tear of rough life visible in every broad, coarse, commonplace feature of the face, till, as you look at it, it grows into a living reality,—not by force of anything remarkable in the man who sat for it, but by dint of the resolute mental insight with which the painter conceived the personage before him [...].

Is the difference attributable to the fact that Holbein and Rembrandt understood their sitters 'better than FLIMSY, DABSTER, & CO. understand the crop of red-coated generals, and black-coated clergymen, who yearly blossom on the walls of the Royal Academy rooms', or is it rather that the sitters of former years 'carried more of their character and calling in their limbs and looks than their [...] brethren now-a-days'? Although Taylor's companion 'jump[s] at the latter alternative. The fault is in the sitters, and not in those they sat to', he should

give a passing glance at those LAWRENCES,—at that staring and tea-boardy canvass of MRS. ANGERSTEIN AND SON, for example; and, remembering [...] that SIR THOMAS was the crack and Court portrait-painter of his time, more unmistakeably popular among the fine ladies and fine gentlemen than even DABSTER, R.A., or FLIMSY, A.R.A., now-a-days, be assured, that what the picture is to be, depends on what the artist is; that the work rises or sinks with the man; and thus thinking, devote yourself rather to the infernal gods than to the fatal fortune which now wreathes with artificial flowers the paltry and untruthful palettes of the DABSTERS and the FLIMSIES.<sup>1</sup>

As their writings on art in the summer of 1851 demonstrate, for Collins and Taylor, as for other critics of the period, the great deficiency of contemporary Academic portraiture was its lack of 'truth'. Truth, or truthfulness, by which was meant 'the depicting of individual character with fidelity', was regarded as 'the highest and most essential quality' of

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<sup>1</sup> [Tom Taylor], 'Punch upon Portraits', *Punch*, vol. 21, no. 522 (July 12 1851), pp. 24-25. (Taylor is identified as the author of this and the other articles in *Punch* attributed to him in this thesis by the *Punch* contributors' ledgers for 1843-1848 and 1848-1855 (British Library, Add. MS 88937/4/30 and 88937/4/31).)

portraiture.<sup>2</sup> A truthful portrait was one that was physiognomically legible to the viewer, one from which they could deduce the character of the sitter – it was a portrait, in short, that was ‘more like the *man*, and less like his superficial nose, eyes, and mouth’.<sup>3</sup> Any number of critical observations could be cited to make the point. ‘To be really good’, a portrait should ‘above all, [...] faithfully represent the mind as well as the form and face of the object from whom it is painted’;<sup>4</sup> it should ‘express[...] quietly not merely the features, but the character of its subject’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Not merely should we have the forms and the distinct and peculiar action characteristic of the individual as distinguished from all others, but the moral impress [...] that stamps the idiosyncrasy of the subject.’<sup>6</sup> ‘[T]he high aim of all young portrait painters’ should be ‘to place on his canvass the mind reflected in the features of his sitter [...]. There is no fame to be obtained by a mere likeness. Such painting is a degradation of the art, and a disgrace to the artist.’<sup>7</sup> ‘The imitation of the form of a face, through which you are incompetent to trace or portray the character, is a laborious imbecility.’<sup>8</sup> For Tom Taylor, portraiture was that branch of art ‘which, if mastered, comprehends the setting out on canvas of the personality of an individual man’;<sup>9</sup> once again, his sentiment was echoed by his friend Wilkie Collins, who made William Kerby, the portrait-painter narrator of the framing narrative of *After Dark*, describe his art as ‘nothing but a right reading of the externals of character recognizably presented to the view of others’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, ascribing to portrait

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Portraiture at the Royal Academy’, *The Spectator*, vol. 19, no. 943 (July 25 1846), pp. 714-15 (p. 714).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy [Second Notice]’, *The Rambler*, vol. 2, no. 20 (May 13 1848), pp. 40-42 (p. 42).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Royal Academy’, *The Observer*, May 10 1846, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Examiner*, no. 1997 (May 9 1846), pp. 293-94.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Royal Academy. Portraiture’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1128 (June 9 1849), pp. 601-604 (p. 601).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Royal Academy Exhibition (Third Notice)’, *The English Gentleman*, no. 57 (May 23 1846), pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

<sup>8</sup> [William Michael Rossetti], ‘Pre-Raphaelitism’, *The Spectator*, vol. 24, no. 1214 (October 4 1851), pp. 955-57, reprinted in William Michael Rossetti, *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary: Notices re-printed, with revisions* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1867) (p. 169).

<sup>9</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Second. Of Portraits, or MR. JONES in and out of the Exhibition’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 464 (June 1 1850), p. 214.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *After Dark*, vol. I, p. 34.

painters the ability first to effect a ‘right reading’ of the inner nature of the sitter on the basis of their outward appearance and then to present the results of that reading in such a way as to enable the viewer to do the same made it possible to rebut the charge brought against them by the history painter James Barry that their art ‘comes as far short of the art of Rafaele, and the other great historical painters, as Homer and Milton are from little occasional versifiers; or Hippocrates, Harvey and Boerhaave, from dentists and corn cutters’,<sup>11</sup> and to raise the status of portraiture – a branch of painting in which Britain was considered to excel, and to which four of the first seven presidents of the Royal Academy devoted all or the bulk of their professional lives – from what Henry Fuseli, Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy Schools from 1799 to 1805 and again from 1810 to 1825, memorably described to his students as ‘nothing but the remembrancer of insignificance, mere human resemblance, in attitude without action, features without meaning, dress without drapery, and situation without propriety’,<sup>12</sup> to high art.

Eminent Academicians had long been accustomed to attribute any lack of truthfulness in portraiture to their sitters’ demand that they do no more than produce a pleasing likeness: according to Sir Joshua Reynolds, likeness was ‘what is most generally desired by such as sit to the painter’,<sup>13</sup> while Fuseli taught that ‘The aim of the artist and the sitter’s wish are confined to external likeness’, with the result that ‘The better artist, condemned to this task, can [...] only distinguish himself from his duller brother by execution, by invoking the assistance of back-ground, chiaroscuro and picturesque effects, and thus sometimes produces

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<sup>11</sup> James Barry, *An Account of a Series of Pictures, in the Great Room of the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, at the Adelphi* (London: The Author, 1783), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting, Delivered at the Royal Academy* (1820), Lecture IV, reprinted in *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, and Fuseli*, ed. Ralph N. Wornum (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848) (p. 448).

<sup>13</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, ed. Pat Rogers (London: Penguin, 1992), Discourse IV (1771), p. 133.

a work which delights the eye'.<sup>14</sup> Fuseli's successor Thomas Phillips, who held the post of Professor of Painting from 1825 to 1832 and was himself a portrait painter, also argued that it was clients rather than painters who were responsible for the failure of contemporary portraiture truthfully to represent character, telling his students that 'relations and intimate friends' of the sitter

ever, and very naturally it must be acknowledged, being uninformed of the best object of art, seek for the exact representation of the external image of the person whom they regard with affection: notwithstanding that, for the most part, that affection is founded upon the invisible qualities of the mind. They are not aware that, when they exact of the painter a minute attention to the former and less important portion of the man, they endanger the latter; and increase the risk of failure in the attempt to delineate moral character; which, if effected, would ultimately produce to them, as it never fails to do to others, more lasting and sensible enjoyment.<sup>15</sup>

But the argument does not stand up to scrutiny. In an age in which – as was seen in chapter 2 above – there was 'nearly universal popular assent to the truth of physiognomy', it must have been obvious that 'the exact representation of the external image' of the sitter was a precondition rather than an obstacle to 'the attempt to delineate moral character'. In reality, the Academic painter's pursuit of truthfulness was fatally impeded by the 'idealisation' that had been a foundational principle of Academic practice since the time of Sir Joshua Reynolds. For Reynolds, idealisation was the means by which portraiture might be redeemed from the charge of mere imitation, the production of the likeness of 'a particular man, and consequently a defective model', and invested with the dignity of the grand style:

[I]f a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he has no other means than by approaching it to a general idea. He leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face, and changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent, which has annexed to it no ideas of meanness from its being familiar to us.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting*, Lecture IV: *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, and Fuseli*, p. 448.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Phillips, *Lectures on the History and Principles of Painting* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1833), Lecture X (1832), p. 464.

<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse IV, p. 131; see also Discourse XI (1782), pp. 257-58 ('The excellence of Portrait-painting, and, we may add, even the likeness, the character, and countenance, [...] depend more upon the

Similarly, John Opie, Professor of Painting from 1805 to 1807, instructed his students that even Titian, greatest of portrait painters, ‘began his career by merely copying nature’, until he learnt that ‘truth itself’ might ‘become uninteresting’,

that hairs, pores, pimples, warts, stains, freckles, and all the train of nauseous minutiae, on which inferior artists waste their puny powers, are incompatible with the true end of imitation; [...] and that the business of painting, like that of poetry, is not to give a feeble catalogue of particulars, but a characteristic, comprehensive, and animated impression of the whole.<sup>17</sup>

It was a doctrine that persisted long after the eighteenth century. Charles Robert Leslie, Professor of Painting from 1847 to 1852, spoke of ‘that un-ideal mode of representation’ that ‘point[s] exactly to what a portrait should not be’,<sup>18</sup> while Richard Redgrave, himself a Royal Academician, wrote in 1851 that

[T]he unskilful portrait-painter seizes on the most salient characteristics of his sitter, and dwells upon all the individual defects of form and feature: the result is a likeness indeed, but a caricature even upon the homely original. The painter more skilled in his art avoids such coarse renderings, and under his hand even the plainest face is refined and generalised.<sup>19</sup>

Redgrave made the point again in a lecture delivered in 1853:

Does the portrait painter [...], whose business it is, if of any artist, to imitate the individual, does he pride himself on a perfect imitation of Nature? Not so. The true artist desires not that his portrait should be a literal copy, such as the sun burns on the iodised paper, but generalises his imitation of the minor and individual details, and seeks rather to inform it with those characterising traits which at once portray the exterior person and the inner man [...]. Indeed, it may be said in Art, that imitation is always wrong and out of place when it disturbs the mind from dwelling on the general idea, or on that idea which is sought to be impressed on the spectator[,]<sup>20</sup>

and the extent to which even in the mid-nineteenth century the Academy privileged idealisation over imitation is further demonstrated by the fact that when in 1847 Ford Madox

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general effect produced by the Painter than on the exact expression of the peculiarities, or minute discrimination of the parts’).

<sup>17</sup> John Opie, *Lectures on Painting, Delivered at the Royal Academy of Arts: With a Letter on the Proposal for a Public Memorial of the Naval Glory of Great Britain* (1809), Lecture IV (1807): *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, and Fuseli*, pp. 326-27.

<sup>18</sup> C. R. Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters* (London: John Murray, 1855), p. 292.

<sup>19</sup> Redgrave, ‘Class XXX. Supplementary Report on Design’, p. 713.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Redgrave, *On the Necessity of Principles in Teaching Design. Being an Address At the Opening of the Session of the Department of Science and Art, October 1853* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1853), pp. 14-15.

Brown submitted to the exhibition a strikingly naturalistic ‘portrait of a City merchant entitled “A Modern Holbein”<sup>21</sup> (figure 3.2), of which the artist later wrote that it sought ‘to



Figure 3.2: Ford Madox Brown, *James Bamford* (1846), oil on canvas, 76.0 × 63.5 cm (Private Collection) (Image © Owner).

substitute simple imitation for *scenic effectiveness*, and purity of natural colour for scholastic depth of tone’, and ‘must appear inexplicable and provoking’ ‘[t]o those who value facile

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Manchester Frescoes.—II. An Interview with Mr. Madox Brown’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, vol. 42, no. 6407 (September 26 1885), p. 4; see also Ford Madox Brown, *The exhibition of WORK, and other Paintings, by Ford Madox Brown, at the Gallery, 191, Piccadilly (opposite Sackville Street). A.D. MDCCCLXV* (London: M’Corquodale and Co., 1865), p. 16 (‘what I called a *Holbein of the 19th century*’).

completeness and handling, above painstaking research into nature',<sup>22</sup> it was rejected.

But to idealise the sitter in this way is necessarily to falsify the likeness, as Charles Kingsley had a character put to a portraitist in a novel published in 1851: ““But, Mr. Mellot, [...] why have you been so unfaithful to your original? why have you, like all artists, been trying to soften and refine on your model?”” – to which she receives the answer ““Because, my dear lady, we are bound to see everything in its ideal,—not as it is, but as it ought to be [...].””<sup>23</sup> (Mellot’s answer is nicely illustrated by the story told by Sir David Wilkie of Sir Thomas Lawrence, who ‘used to say, that even in the majestic head of Mrs. Siddons there were parts and forms which did not appear to belong to Mrs. Siddons, and should therefore be omitted in her portraiture’.)<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Reynolds himself acknowledged that the ‘general idea’ of a subject is likely to be inconsistent with the truth:

[I]f an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from general nature. It is very difficult to ennoble the character of a countenance but at the expense of the likeness [...].<sup>25</sup>

What is more, as Reynolds’s use of such terms as ‘raise and improve’ and ‘ennoble’ makes clear, an idealised portrayal of a sitter is likely to be more agreeable to that sitter than a truthful likeness would be. So much was noted by more than one contemporary manual on portraiture. John Burnet wrote in *Practical Hints on Portrait Painting* (1850) that

Alexander would never sit for his portrait to any one but Apelles, who knew how to ennoble the likeness; while Cromwell desired Sir Peter Lely to represent all his warts and excrescences. A very little practice will soon convince an artist that most of his sitters will be actuated by the feelings of Alexander rather than by those of the stern

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<sup>22</sup> Brown, *The exhibition of WORK, and other Paintings*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> [Charles Kingsley], *Yeast: A Problem* (2 vols) (London: John W. Parker, 1851), vol. I, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie; with his Journals, Tours, and Critical Remarks on Works of Art; and a Selection from his Correspondence* (3 vols) (London: John Murray, 1843), vol. III, p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse IV, pp. 132-33.

Protector of the Commonwealth[,]”<sup>26</sup>

and Henry Murray made the same point in *The Art of Portrait Painting in Oil Colours*

(1851):

There is a class of sitters who insist on being painted precisely “as they are,” they desire no modifications, but wish to see simply their veritable selves without flattery or qualification; and frequently the young artist, in the simplicity of his inexperience, endeavours to meet their wishes; and the more satisfactory, in certain cases, such a portrait may be to the artist, it was never yet wholly agreeable to a sitter; for in respect of personal appearance human nature is at best “indifferent honest.”<sup>27</sup>

To idealise therefore came all too easily to mean no more than to flatter, as Tom Taylor pointed out in characteristically trenchant terms:

I don’t know how it is, there is something in the face of BLOGG of STOKE POGIS which I cannot find in this gorgeous full-length of him to be presented, as I learn from the catalogue, “by his grateful fellow-townsmen” [...].

M’GILP, who is annoyed at the way I talk about the Exhibition generally, points out to me that this is an idealised portrait, and that BLOGG has just as much right to be idealised as BYRON or BEETHOVEN, whenever he becomes a subject for the artist. I quite admit it. But I respectfully contend that this is not the right sort of idealising treatment to submit our BLOGGS to. Idealising is not sticking a vulgar likeness of the man, in his most vulgar aspect, into the midst of circumstances and accessories in no way appropriate to him. If the painter will catch me that in BLOGG’S face, which makes him BLOGG rather than SLOGG or MOGG—if he will give me the character of the man in his features, as BLOGG himself unconsciously does, even when he flatters himself he is most unlike the BLOGG of every day—then he has given me the *idea* of BLOGG—he has given me something which, though at no single moment I may see it in BLOGG’S face, is yet the impression which the habitual contemplation of BLOGG’S face [...] leaves behind it. I cannot admit of any idealising of BLOGG beyond this. If by idealising him M’GILP means that the painter ought to make him more noble, less coarse, less evidently a money-grubbing, hard-headed, rough-spoken, not over-scrupulous, but on the whole kindly-disposed and shrewd burgess and chief-

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<sup>26</sup> John Burnet, *Practical Hints on Portrait Painting: Illustrated by Examples from the Works of Vandyke and Other Masters* (London: David Bogue, 1850), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Murray, *The Art of Portrait Painting in Oil Colours, with Observations on Setting and Painting the Figure* (London: Winsor and Newton, 1851), p. 5; see also p. 44:

If a complexion be coarse in colour, and show a network of minute ramifying blood-vessels, having the furrows on the brow and the crow’s foot under the eye unusually deeply graven, and the cheek overhanging the upper lip from the wing of the nose—these are all points which might be seized, and being verified upon the canvas every spectator would applaud the likeness, but not one would approve of his own portrait so faithfully rendered.

magistrate of Stoke-Pogis, then I object to idealisation in this sense altogether.<sup>28</sup>

After the first photographic studios in London opened in 1841, portrait painters had available to them a new standard of truthfulness in the representation of the human face. But it was precisely because the principal characteristic of the photographic portrait was its truthfulness, its lack of flattering ‘idealisation’, that it was deemed by artists to be unworthy of the name of portraiture: in the supposed words of the Swiss-born portraitist Alfred Edward Chalon, asked by Queen Victoria ‘whether he was not afraid that photography would ruin his profession. “Ah, non, Madame,” he replied [...], “photographie can’t flattère.”’<sup>29</sup> In the view of *The Art-Union*, ‘The Daguerreotype portrait is nowhere received as a substitute for the artist’s portrait’; all that could be said for it was that it facilitated the task of the painter by giving him ‘what we may call an analytical display of the features—a kind of skeleton map, which saves him some rough work, and sets him free to supply the deficiencies in truth, in life, and in spirit’.<sup>30</sup> Other commentators wrote in the same vein:

Many people imagine that the Daguerreotype will supersede the labours of the artist. This is a very mistaken idea, the artists who hang out their specimens at the door, labelled “In this style, one guinea,” will, without doubt, be entirely swept away by this powerful competitor; but with the province of the true artist it does not interfere. It must be borne in mind that the Daguerreotype does nothing more than copy nature in the most servile manner—it elaborates a pimple as carefully as the most divine expression. It has no power of selecting what is fine and discarding what is mean in its representation of any object, this, Art, in the best sense of the word, is alone capable of doing.<sup>31</sup>

*The Morning Post* felt able confidently to advise artists that they need not be alarmed that photographic portraiture could interfere with ‘the real interest of their profession’;

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<sup>28</sup> [Tom Taylor], “‘Our Critic’ among the Pictures. Something about some Portraits and Landscapes’, *Punch*, vol. 23, no. 572 (June 26 1852), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah A. Tooley, ‘The Portraits of Queen Victoria’, *The Woman at Home*, no. 46 (July 1897), pp. 801-12 (p. 812).

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Application of the Talbotype’, *The Art-Union*, vol. 8, no. 95 (July 1 1846), p. 195.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Winter, ‘The Pencil of Nature’, *The People’s Journal*, vol. 2 (1846), pp. 288-89 (p. 288).

photography 'is declared to be fraught with danger to artistic development; but hitherto it has wrought no effect, nor can we anticipate that its influence will be seriously felt at any future period'.

It is so distinct from portrait painting that the two cannot clash. They are as far apart as fact is removed from fallacy, and widely separated as the police report is from the poem. The reflection of the image is exact, but the grace of ideality cannot be impressed. We see the features, but the life that animates and the mind that informs them are absent. [...] [T]he character that individualises a portrait cannot be conveyed.<sup>32</sup>

Statements to the same effect can be found in the fiction of the period. In Leitch Ritchie's *Wearyfoot Common*, first published in serial form at the beginning of 1854, an artist, advised that a portrait-painter should "engage his sitter in conversation, interesting enough to draw out the expression of character. He cannot otherwise obtain a correct likeness", replies

"I must get hold of the vehicle first, [...] the soul will then, I hope, come by degrees. As for a correct likeness, that is the result of a mechanical tact, sometimes possessed by the merest dauber. A true artist [...] paints the mind as well as the body, and renders in colours what the sitter is unconscious of himself. This marks the distinction between photography and art. The former, being without intelligence, can copy only the external features; while the latter, although less skilful in this part of the process, is able to seize upon the intellectual being. Even as photography represents surfaces with such exquisite minuteness as to trace phenomena invisible to the naked eye, so art brings out flaws or beauties of the character unsuspected before. This is called, though not with philosophical accuracy, idealising[.]"<sup>33</sup>

and a couple of years later Charles Kingsley had a character in *Two Years Ago* (1857) opine that the inability of the daguerreotype to effect "what some painters call idealizing" means that "for taking portraits, in any true sense, it will always be useless".<sup>34</sup> Such pronouncements reflected the doctrine of the Academy. Richard Redgrave's prescription that a portrait by a true artist should not be 'a literal copy, such as the sun burns on the iodised paper' but should seek 'rather to inform it with those characterising traits which at once portray the exterior person and the inner man' has already been seen, and C. R. Leslie taught

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<sup>32</sup> 'Fine Arts', *The Morning Post*, no. 22933 (June 7 1847), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Leitch Ritchie, *Wearyfoot Common* (London: David Bogue, 1855), p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Two Years Ago* (3 vols) (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1857), vol. I, pp. 237-38.

the students at the Royal Academy Schools that photography ‘in its present state’

confirms what has always been felt by the best artists and the best critics, that facsimile is not that species of resemblance to Nature, even in a portrait, that is most agreeable: for while the best calotypes remind us of mezzotint engravings from Velasquez, Rembrandt, or Reynolds, they are still inferior in general effect to such engravings: and they thus help to show that the ideal is equally a principle of portrait-painting as of all other Art; and that not only does this consist in the best view of the face, the best light and shadow, and the most characteristic attitude of the figure, for all these may be selected for a photographic picture, but that the ideal of a portrait, like the ideal of all Art, depends on something which can only be communicated by the mind, through the hand and eye, and without any other mechanical intervention than that of the pencil.<sup>35</sup>

A revealing light is shed on contemporary perceptions of photographic and painted portraiture by the story of Henry Ryall’s 1845 engraving of the Duke of Wellington. On 1 May 1844, his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, Wellington ‘honoured M. Claudet with a sitting for a portrait at the daguerreotype establishment in the Adelaide Gallery. The noble duke sat twice, and the result was extremely satisfactory.’<sup>36</sup> The resulting image was hailed by one commentator as

a portrait [...] of singular excellence, presenting, with remarkable truth, the personal individualities of the hero, without a trace of the hardness and lineal aberration which sometimes disfigure and falsify photographic images. [...] [T]he traits of visage which give peculiarity and expression are reproduced with marvellous vraisemblance; and the head, with its scant hair and venerable aspect, at once recalls the illustrious individual to mind and recognition<sup>37</sup>

and by another as

the most extraordinary portrait of any one we have ever beheld [...]. It presents to the spectator the Duke of Wellington as he is *at this moment*—as he may be seen in the House—as he *looks* to those who are admitted to an interview with him.<sup>38</sup>

One of the likenesses of the duke (either figure 3.3 – which may itself be a redaguerreotype

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<sup>35</sup> Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters*, p. 309.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Claudet’s Daguerreotype’, *The Standard*, no. 6175 (May 2 1844), p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> ‘The Duke of Wellington’, *The Morning Herald*, no 19386 (October 22 1844), p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The Duke of Wellington.—Claudet’s Daguerreotype’, *The World of Fashion*, vol. 21, no. 248 (November 1 1844), p. 254.

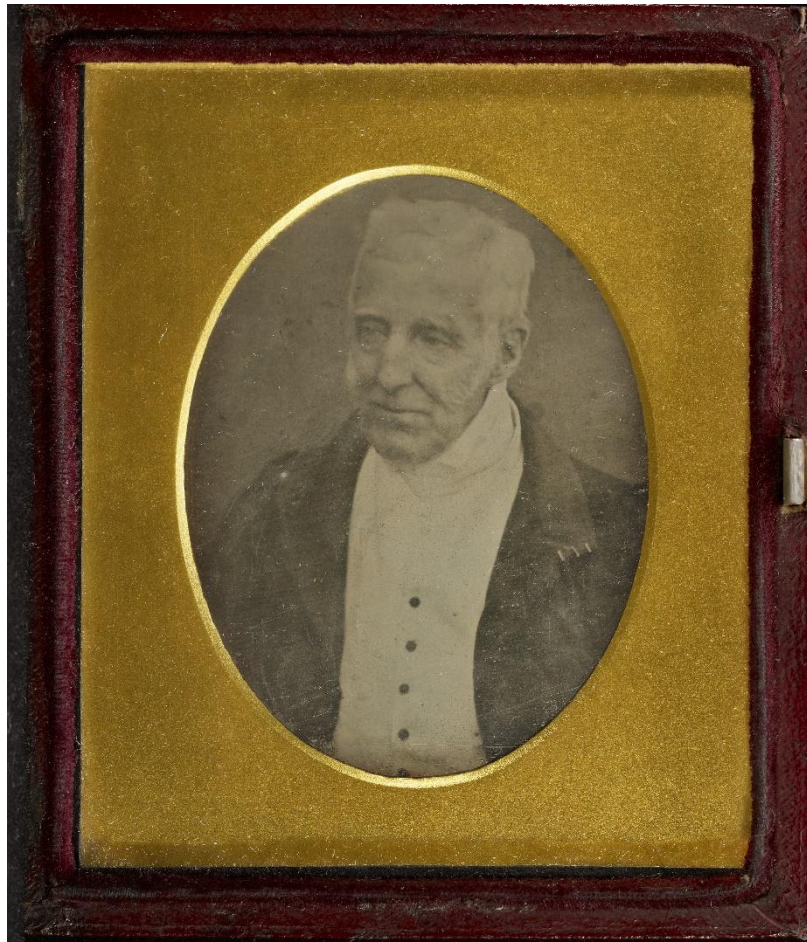


Figure 3.3: Antoine Claudet, *The Duke of Wellington* (1844), daguerreotype, 7.8 × 6.4 cm (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Gift of Dana Broccoli) (Image © J. Paul Getty Museum).

of the daguerreotype held in the Wellington Collection at Stratfield Saye House – or another image, whose whereabouts is unknown, and in which the duke may have been looking to the right rather than to the left) was acquired by a printseller, Jonathan Watson, with a view to its being engraved and sold as a print. Rather than commission an engraver directly, however, Watson deemed it necessary to place ‘[t]he result of the mechanical process’ of the daguerreotype in the hands of Abraham Solomon, ‘an artist of rising reputation’, to paint from it ‘an enlarged portrait, something beyond miniature size’.<sup>39</sup> In Solomon’s painting (figure 3.4), the duke’s face is represented much as it is in the daguerreotype (although

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Claudet’s Portrait of the Duke of Wellington’, *The Times*, no. 18930 (May 22 1845), p. 7.



Figure 3.4: Abraham Solomon, *The Duke of Wellington* (1844), oil on canvas, 52.5 × 42.5 cm (Walmer Castle) (Image © Historic England).

Solomon may have reversed the orientation of the duke's body), but it has been idealised. Not only has Wellington been made to appear somewhat younger than in Claudet's portrait, but he has been given an expression that is both softer and more quizzical – more in accordance, perhaps, with public expectations of the appearance of the most famous, and most represented, Briton of his time. (As in the case of the 'majestic head' of Mrs Siddons, in which 'there were parts and forms which did not appear to belong to Mrs. Siddons, and should therefore be omitted in her portraiture', so there were aspects of Wellington's

physiognomy that did not appear to belong to the Great Duke: as one observer wrote of an earlier portrait by Henry Perronet Briggs (1837) (Walmer Castle),

[T]he fact is, the Duke's face, notwithstanding its strongly marked features, puzzles the limners, simply because they will be trying to make him a great man in spite, not of his teeth, but of his mouth: they are afraid to paint, as HB [John Doyle] draws his face, as it really is.)<sup>40</sup>

In addition, Solomon has expanded the frame of the daguerreotype portrait, from head and shoulders only to a half length, and included a red chair on which the duke is sitting or leaning. Thereafter, in the words of *The Times*,

Both the daguerreotype portrait and the oil painting were [...] handed over [...] to Mr. Ryall, who engraved a plate from the two, which has just been published by Mr. Watson. The engraving has been principally made from the daguerreotype portrait, the work of Mr. Solomon being used to correct those defects which of necessity arise in all daguerreotype portraits. Mr. Ryall has produced a likeness surpassing in fidelity both the original daguerreotype and the painted copy; in short, a likeness so true to nature and so complete a translation of the features, character and very look of the illustrious duke, that nothing but the reflection of the face of his grace in a mirror can surpass it.<sup>41</sup>

Published on 1 May 1845, Wellington's 76<sup>th</sup> birthday, the print (figure 3.5) was a bestseller,

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<sup>40</sup> 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy. Second Notice—The Portraits', *The Spectator*, vol. 10, no. 463 (May 13 1837), pp. 451-52 (p. 451).

<sup>41</sup> 'Claudet's Portrait of the Duke of Wellington', *The Times*, no. 18930 (May 22 1845), p. 7.

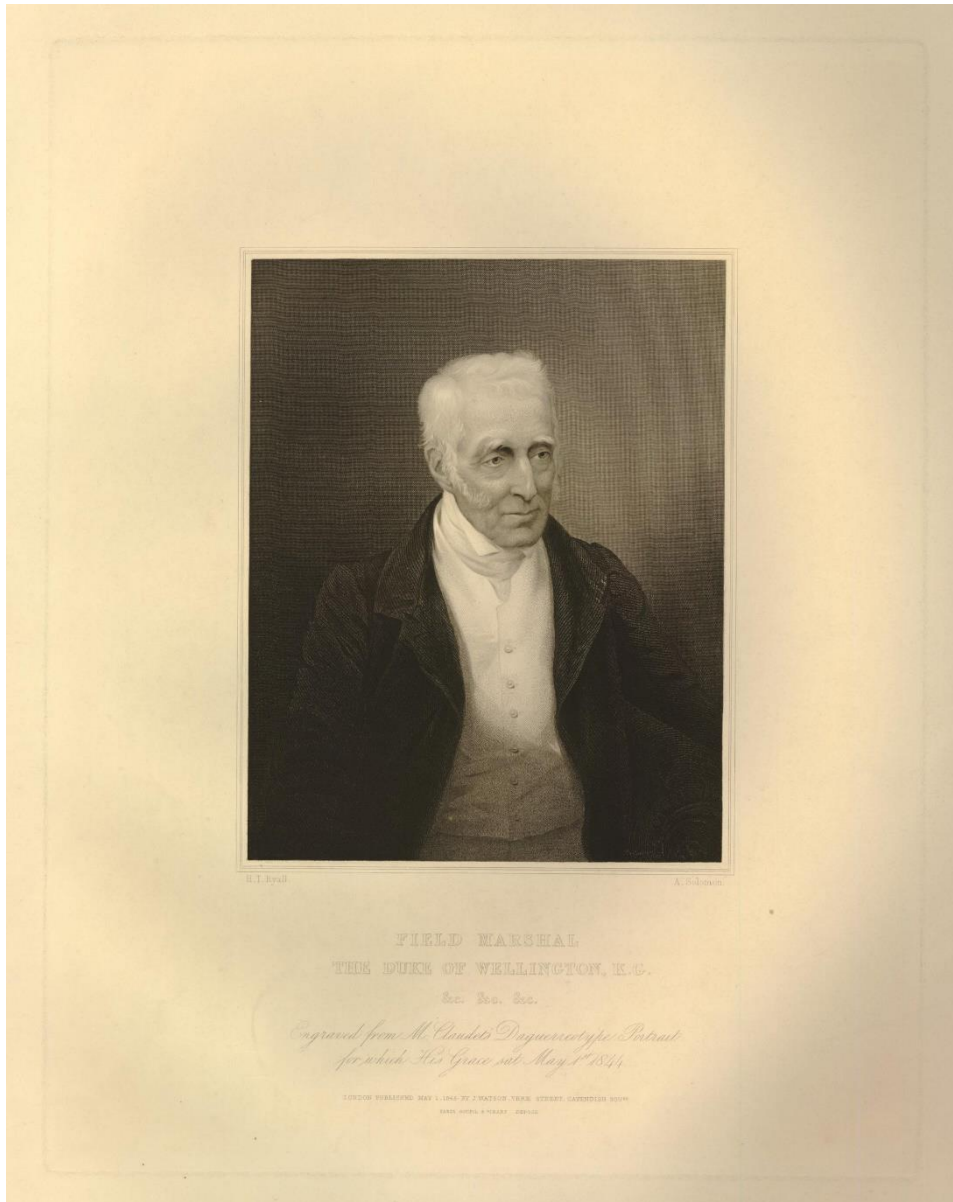


Figure 3.5: Henry Thomas Ryall, after Abraham Solomon, *Field Marshal The Duke of Wellington, K.G.* (1845), stipple, etching, and engraving, 39.1 × 30.2 cm (British Museum, London) (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum).

‘seen in every printseller’s window, [...] a glorious example of what use [the Daguerreotype] can be made as a handmaid of Art’.<sup>42</sup> But although the print states that it is ‘Engraved from M. Claudet’s Daguerreotype Portrait for which His Grace sat May 1<sup>st</sup> 1844’, it identifies ‘A. Solomon’ rather than Claudet as the actual creator of the image from which Ryall’s engraved portrait was made, and it is clearly based on Solomon’s rather than Claudet’s portrait. That

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Winter, ‘The Pencil of Nature’, *The People’s Journal*, vol. 2 (1846), pp. 288-89 (p. 289).

prompts a question that seems not to have been asked by those contemporary commentators who considered it ‘a matter of congratulation, that the daguerreotype process was in this instance so perfectly satisfactory’ that ‘not a trait of the original man has been lost, for the image of the great duke has been seized and retained with a literalness and individuality about which there can be no dispute’.<sup>43</sup> If the daguerreotype process had been so perfectly satisfactory, why had it been necessary to make a painted version of Claudet’s photographic portrait at all? Notwithstanding what he apparently said to *The Times*, it seems unlikely that Watson believed that Solomon’s work was required in order to correct the ‘defects which of necessity arise in all daguerreotype portraits’; as has already been seen, other observers considered that Claudet’s portrait was ‘without a particle of the hardness and lineal aberration which sometimes disfigure and falsify photographic images’. The more plausible answer must be that Watson commissioned the painting in order to idealise the daguerreotype – to soften what was in his view the unacceptably unflattering truthfulness of photographic portraiture. Indeed, Watson acknowledged as much when he used very much the same language about the even more obviously idealised further print of Wellington that he published in 1853, soon after the duke’s death (figure 3.6), this one engraved from the

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<sup>43</sup> ‘The Duke of Wellington’, *The Standard*, no. 6507 (June 6 1845), p. 6.



Figure 3.6: James Posselwhite, after John Lucas, *Arthur Wellesley, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Wellington* (1853), stipple and etching, 75.5 × 58.3 cm (British Museum, London) (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum).

other of the two daguerreotypes made by Claudet in 1844. On that occasion the daguerreotype was “translated” for engraving’ by John Lucas, an artist who, ‘having had sixty sittings of the great Duke at various periods of his life’, was said – in words that might have been used by Richard Redgrave or C. R. Leslie, or any other of the expounders of Academic orthodoxy quoted in the previous paragraph – to be ‘more qualified, perhaps, than any other person to correct the mechanical asperities of the daguerreotype, and infuse into his

copy those subtleties of expression which denote and establish individuality'.<sup>44</sup>

If to idealise the subject of a portrait is to falsify the likeness, as was argued above, then it must also be to render the portrait less physiognomically legible. So the inevitable result of Academic portrait painters' flattery of their sitters under the guise of idealisation was that they failed to achieve the 'high aim' of their art, 'the setting out on canvas of the personality of an individual man'. As *The Fine Arts' Journal* wrote in 1847, 'How can it be expected that a portrait-painter can give the character of the individual to his picture if he is not permitted to make it conscientiously like[?]'.

A portrait painter, that conscientiously represented the active individuality of his sitter, would not now be employed; he must elevate, he must idealize, he must generalize, and *genteelify* the truth, until the character of an individual is lost in the monotony of conventionality.<sup>45</sup>

John Ruskin made the same point in his Edinburgh lectures in 1853. Although he too recognised that 'The painters cannot live but by flattery; we should desert them if they spoke honestly', the consequence of their 'love of what is called ideality [...] in preference to truth' was that 'we can have no good portraiture; for in the striving after that which is *not* in their model, they lose the inner and deeper nobleness which *is* in their model'. Ruskin illustrated his argument by an example:

I saw not long ago [...] the portrait of a man whom I knew well—a young man, but a religious man—and one who had suffered much from sickness. The whole dignity of his features and person depended upon the expression of serene, yet solemn, purpose sustaining a feeble frame; and the painter, by way of flattering him, strengthened him, and made him athletic in body, gay in countenance, idle in gesture; and the whole power and being of the man himself were lost.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> 'Portrait of the Duke of Wellington', *The Morning Herald*, no. 22246 (August 25 1853), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Portraits of the Royal Academy', *The Fine Arts' Journal*, vol. 1, no. 31 (June 5 1847), pp. 485-87 (pp. 485-86).

<sup>46</sup> John Ruskin, 'Lecture IV. Pre-Raphaelitism', *Lectures on Architecture and Painting, delivered at Edinburgh in November, 1853* (1854), pp. 189-232; *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 12, p. 154. Ruskin there said that 'The beginning and end of modern portraiture is adulation'; he had been even more scathing in *Modern Painters II* about

A decade earlier, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (as she was not yet known) had also pointed the contrast between conventional Academic portraiture and truthful portraiture in her sonnet 'On Mr. Haydon's Portrait of Mr. Wordsworth' (1842), inspired by *Wordsworth on Helvellyn* (figure 3.7) by her friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, himself long at daggers drawn with the

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that principle of portraiture which prevails with us in these days, whose end seems to be the expression of vanity throughout, in face and in all circumstances of accompaniment; tending constantly to insolence of attitude, and levity and haughtiness of expression, and worked out farther in mean accompaniments of worldly splendour and possession [...]: whence has arisen such a school of portraiture as must make the people of the nineteenth century the shame of their descendants, and the butt of all time (A Graduate of Oxford (John Ruskin), *Modern Painters. Volume II* (1846): *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 4 (1903), p. 193).



Figure 3.7: Benjamin Robert Haydon, *William Wordsworth* (1842), oil on canvas, 124.5 × 99.1 cm (National Portrait Gallery, London) (Image © National Portrait Gallery).

Royal Academy:<sup>47</sup>

Wordsworth upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud  
Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind  
Then break against the rock, and show behind  
The lowland valleys floating up to crowd  
The sense with beauty. He with forehead bowed

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<sup>47</sup> Haydon's portrait was painted to commemorate Wordsworth's composition of a sonnet ('By Art's Bold Privilege') on Haydon's picture *Wellington Musing on the Battlefield of Waterloo* (1839) (National Portrait Gallery, London); in the words of Richard Walker, Barrett Browning's composition of her own sonnet 'thus achiev[ed] a typical Victorian exchange between literature and art – a poem on a picture of a poet composing a poem on a picture' (R. J. B. Walker, *Regency Portraits* (2 vols) (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1985), vol. 1, p. 575).

And humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined  
 Before the sovran thought of his own mind,  
 And very meek with inspirations proud,  
 Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest  
 By the high-altar, singing prayer and prayer  
 To the higher Heavens. A noble vision free  
 Our Haydon's hand has flung out from the mist!  
 No portrait this, with Academic air!  
 This is the poet and his poetry.<sup>48</sup>

Reviewers of the annual exhibition of the Academy were equally critical of the failure of portraits 'with Academic air' truthfully to represent the personality of their subjects. In the words of *The Spectator* in 1844,

The herd of likeness-takers concern themselves very little about the moral and mental characteristics of their victims; and disregard at will those lesser traits of individuality—such as physical conformation, habitual attitude, air, and complexion—that contribute materially in the aggregate to personal identity. In a word, they proceed mechanically, not intellectually: provided they hit off a recognizable likeness and turn out a smart furniture-picture, they and their employers are satisfied.<sup>49</sup>

The paper returned to the issue two years later:

A prevailing notion, even among the better class of limners, in the present day, is, that an agreeable likeness and a pleasing or effective picture combine all that are required in a good portrait. [...] Their object being only to please the sitter, they are content with producing a recognizable resemblance in feature, with a varnish of flattery (or what is intended as such) to gloss over personal defects. Character is only regarded in so far as it is pictorially effective [...].<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth B. Barrett, 'Sonnet. On Mr. Haydon's Portrait of Mr. Wordsworth', *The Athenæum*, no. 783 (October 29 1842), p. 932, reprinted in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (5 vols) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), vol. 2 (ed. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor) (p. 76). Barrett Browning may have had in mind the portrait of Wordsworth by Henry William Pickersgill (1833) (St John's College, Cambridge), which had been criticised when exhibited at the Royal Academy precisely because it failed to capture 'the poet and his poetry':

It is not enough for an artist to draw a cold map of the human countenance, and because he has placed the nose right, and the eyes not wrong and opened a mouth where a mouth should be, to think he has done enough, and wipe his brushes and desist. No, the genius of art must do more: we demand for Wordsworth, not a look equal to the management of the stamp revenue for Westmorland alone, but something of that dignity of intellect, which dictated his truly noble poems: we want a little inspiration: we desire such expression as will induce the spectator to say, "that is the look of a poet" ('The Exhibition of the Royal Academy [Second Notice]', *The Athenæum*, no. 342 (May 17 1834), pp. 378-79 (p. 379)). In the words of another reviewer of Pickersgill's picture, '[T]he lines are here, and so were the features in the mask which the Fox admired, exclaiming, "What a pity it is that it has *no brains!*"' ('Royal Academy', *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 20190 (May 12 1834), p. 3).

<sup>49</sup> 'Royal Academy Exhibition. Portraiture', *The Spectator*, vol. 17, no. 829 (May 18 1844), pp. 474-75 (p. 474).

<sup>50</sup> 'Portraiture at the Royal Academy', *The Spectator*, vol. 19, no. 943 (July 25 1846), pp. 714-15 (p. 714).

Rather than ‘make the character of his original a matter of deep study, and contemplate it under every perceptible aspect’<sup>51</sup> in order to represent ‘that vivid individuality which living originals always present’,<sup>52</sup> ‘that individuality which constitutes the value of a portrait’,<sup>53</sup> most successful portrait painters found it much quicker and easier to subordinate the personality of the sitter to the manner of the painter in the way that was mocked by Tom Taylor (‘Whoever encounters a canvass from that elegant and gentlemanly creature, FLIMSY, A.R.A., that he doesn’t say, at the first glance, “Ah, that’s FLIMSY!”—seeing in every frame FLIMSY always, and his original never, except as quite an accessory’),<sup>54</sup> and thereby to indulge what R. N. Wornum called ‘the too common propensity for sacrificing individual *character* to certain conventional notions of *effect*.’<sup>55</sup> (A favourite way to achieve such ‘effect’ was to denote the status and occupation of the sitter by the clumsy signifiers scathingly described by John Ruskin as ‘hints or proclamations of what the person has done or supposes himself to have done, which if known, it is gratuitous in the portrait to exhibit, and, if unknown, it is insolent in the portrait to proclaim’;<sup>56</sup> thus Wilkie Collins complained in his review of John Prescott Knight’s portrait of Charles Barry, exhibited in 1851 (figure 3.8), that ‘Mr. Knight paints a portrait of Mr. Barry [...]; and, because he happens to be a

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Royal Academy. Portraits’, *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1635 (May 20 1848), pp. 345-46 (p. 345).

<sup>52</sup> ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy. (Continued)’, *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 2, no. 55 (May 20 1843), pp. 338-40 (p. 338).

<sup>53</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Court, Lady’s Magazine, Monthly Critic and Museum*, united series vol. 11 (June 1843), pp. 151-54 (p. 151).

<sup>54</sup> In the words of *The Athenæum*,

So many of our portrait-painters are remarkable for mannerism, exaggerated each coming year, that the observant who have visited some half-dozen Academy Exhibitions, if prompted by a hint or two as to brown or fair, the stature and the age of the subject, could, in nine cases out of ten, describe the portrait by guess-work—the name of the artist once being given  
(‘Royal Academy’, *The Athenæum*, no. 918 (May 31 1845), pp. 546-47).

<sup>55</sup> *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, and Fuseli*, p. 257.

<sup>56</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters II: The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 4, p. 193



Figure 3.8: John Prescott Knight, *Charles Barry* (1851), oil on canvas, 144.8 × 111.8 cm (National Portrait Gallery, London) (Image © National Portrait Gallery).

celebrated architect, thinks it necessary to make him flourish a pair of compasses, with a smile of unutterable triumph.<sup>57</sup> As Charles Kingsley had a character say in *Two Years Ago*,

“Portrait painters now depend for their effect on the mere accidents of the entourage; on dress, on landscape, even on broad hints of a man’s occupation, putting a plan on the engineer’s table, and a roll in the statesman’s hands, like the old Greek who wrote ‘this is an ox’ under his picture.”<sup>58</sup>

Repeated in a series of large pictures all depicting ‘full-length figures of ladies and

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<sup>57</sup> [Collins], ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, p. 626.

<sup>58</sup> Kingsley, *Two Years Ago*, vol. I, p. 179.

gentlemen—over-dressed women dandling over-dressed children, and men standing bolt upright trying to look dignified, or seated in armchairs trying to look easy’,<sup>59</sup> these ‘conventional notions of *effect*’ led inevitably to homogeneity and to complaints that the portraits shown at the Academy amounted to ‘little better than *rifacciamenti*’ of the practice of Lawrence’s compeers ‘reduced to commonplaces of action and obviousness of arrangement and accessory. There is small attempt to evoke character from the representation of human physiognomy’.<sup>60</sup> In the words of a reviewer of the exhibition of 1847, ‘There is a similarity of style running through the whole which rather indicates that the authors have learned the rules than applied the principles of their profession. Likenesses are seen, but portraits are not consequently witnessed’.<sup>61</sup>

It was not only homogeneity of style that characterised Academic portraiture, but also homogeneity of subject. To have one’s portrait hung at the exhibition of the Royal Academy was the preserve of the higher echelons of society, to the extent that in the view of one commentator the portrait painter ‘must not only be an artist [...], but he ought to have a mind cultivated in the perception of worldly and conventional distinctions, and be thoroughly conversant with the manners, aspect and demeanour of the most elegant society’.<sup>62</sup> Wilkie Collins satirised that social exclusivity in a novella serialised in *Household Words* in 1856. The narrator of *A Rogue’s Life* embarks on a career as a portrait painter, a branch of art in which, as he is advised by an artist friend, ‘Drawing is of no consequence; painting is of no consequence; perspective is of no consequence; ideas are of no consequence. Everything is of

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Royal Academy [Concluded]’, *The Athenæum*, no. 816 (June 17 1843), pp. 570-71 (p. 570).

<sup>60</sup> ‘Royal Academy’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1071 (May 6 1848), pp. 463-65 (p. 463).

<sup>61</sup> ‘The Royal Academy’, *Douglas Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper*, no. 43 (May 8 1847), pp. 573-74 (p. 573).

<sup>62</sup> ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Examiner*, no. 1635 (June 2 1839), pp. 343-44 (p. 343).

no consequence, except catching a likeness and flattering your sitter.’<sup>63</sup> The eponymous rogue finds it impossible, however, to flatter the ‘inveterately and completely ugly’ face of his brother-in-law – even Sir Thomas Lawrence, ‘undoubtedly the most artful and uncompromising flatterer that ever smoothed out all the natural characteristic wrinkles from a sitter’s face’, would have found Mr Batterbury too much for him – and is forced despite himself to ‘the resource of absolutely painting a genuine likeness’. He also paints a self-portrait, ‘making my own likeness quite a pleasant relief to the ugliness of my brother-in-law’s’:

It was my intention to send both portraits to the Royal Academy Exhibition, to get custom, and show the public generally what I could do. I knew the institution with which I had to deal, and called my own likeness, Portrait of a Nobleman.

That dexterous appeal to the tenderest feelings of my distinguished countrymen very nearly succeeded. The portrait of Mr. Batterbury (much the more carefully-painted picture of the two) was summarily turned out. The Portrait of a Nobleman was politely reserved to be hung up, if the Royal Academicians could possibly find room for it.<sup>64</sup>

Less amusing are the sneering comments made in the press about portraits of sitters deemed to be not what Tom Taylor called ‘fine ladies and fine gentlemen’ but merely rich enough to pay to have their picture painted by a Royal Academician and thus guaranteed to be hung in the annual exhibition.<sup>65</sup> In 1845, for example, A. E. Chalon exhibited ‘a huge picture [...],

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<sup>63</sup> [Wilkie Collins], ‘A Rogue’s Life. Written by Himself. In Five Chapters. Chapter the First’, *Household Words*, vol. 13, no. 310 (March 1 1856), pp. 157-66; the novella was republished many years later as *A Rogue’s Life: From his Birth to his Marriage* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1879) (p. 29).

<sup>64</sup> [Wilkie Collins], ‘A Rogue’s Life. Written by Himself. In Five Chapters. Chapter the Second’, *Household Words*, vol. 13, no. 311 (March 8 1856), pp. 181-91; Collins, *A Rogue’s Life: From his Birth to his Marriage*, pp. 34-35; 38.

<sup>65</sup> The fact that Royal Academicians were entitled as of right to exhibit up to eight works a year, so that the portrait painters among their number could assure their sitters that their picture would be on view, was a recurring source of grievance to critics of the institution. *The Sunday Times* noted in 1844 that more than half of the works in the exhibition were portraits, and went on:

When we hear that upwards of *a thousand pictures* have been returned to the artists, for want of room to hang them, many of which it must be supposed possessed sufficient merit to obtain a place on the walls, we ask the questions that must suggest themselves to every disinterested lover of art, “Is the Royal Academy to be an exclusive mart for the sale of works of portrait-painting R.A.’s? Is art in its highest walk to be made secondary to the mechanical trade of face-painting? Is the young artist to be told there is no room for the works of pencil—that the labour of many a day of feverish aspirations and anxious hopes is to be consigned to the obscurity of his chamber—that he shall have no opportunity of submitting his picture to the test of

which fills the place usually occupied by Royalty or some scion of the blood royal,—a full length of a very tall gentlewoman, ten times as grand as any Queen’;<sup>66</sup> it was a portrait of a Mrs Thwaites (whereabouts unknown), the wealthy widow of a tradesman, of which *The Art-Union* wrote that

This portrait is a very humiliating, but a very powerful, illustration of our national character; the might of money in England is a proverb; the lady here painted—whose humble name has been transformed from Thwaites into Thwaytes, we hope by order of the artist only—is the widow of that respectable grocer who bequeathed a sugar-plum to the wife he had married when he was vending figs by the pennyworth—

“A plain good man.”

She has, it appears, exhausted one of her money-bags in the purchase of diamonds, which she has permitted the artist to look at; and they are “all over” her—money’s worth from head to foot! [...] Mrs. Thwaytes has been done all over in jewels—

“Rich and rare are the gems she wears;”

and there could be no possible objection to her commissioning Mr. A. E. Chalon to paint her ten thousand pounds’ worth of diamonds and her face (for £500); but to exhibit the homely daw in the peacock’s feathers—not borrowed but bought—in the place of honour in the British Royal Academy is giving her “a glory” of which her honest grocer-husband never could have dreamt[.]<sup>67</sup>

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public opinion—because, forsooth, some right honourable has had himself egregiously flattered by a fashionable portrait-painter and the vanity of both parties must be gratified by hanging six feet of impertinence in a conspicuous situation in the exhibition rooms?”

(‘The Portrait Nuisance’, *The Sunday Times*, no. 1126 (May 19 1844), p. 2). *The Art-Union* made the same point a few years later, observing that it was

impossible to avoid complaint that while so many excellent works in history and landscape have been rejected “for want of room,” so large a number of portraits should have been hung; and it is somewhat strange that [...], among these portraits, there is scarcely one of a distinguished personage—interesting beyond the immediate circle of friends. In this respect the members of the Royal Academy enjoy a prodigious advantage over their competitors; ladies and gentlemen who have been painted like to see themselves figuring here; and it is unquestionable that, in many instances, they sit for this express purpose.

The writer went on to record a ‘case in point [...] brought to our knowledge’:

[N]ot long ago a gentleman applied to an artist to paint him “full length:” all preliminaries being arranged, he said, “Of course you will guarantee my being hung at the Exhibition.” “I cannot do so,” replied the artist, “not being a member, I can guarantee nothing of the kind; but I can pledge myself to send your portrait to the Royal Academy, and it is not likely they will reject it.” The gentleman said he would consider. The result of his consideration is, that his portrait—full length—is now in the Exhibition; painted, in a very gay costume, by a member of the Academy, who, of course, did guarantee its being exhibited

(‘The Royal Academy. The Eightieth Exhibition—1848’, *The Art-Union*, vol. 10 (June 1 1848), pp. 165-80 (p. 180)).

<sup>66</sup> ‘Royal Academy’, *The Athenæum*, no. 915 (May 10 1845), pp. 465-68 (p. 466).

<sup>67</sup> ‘The Royal Academy. Seventy-seventh Exhibition. 1845’, *The Art-Union*, vol. 7, no. 81 (June 1 1845), pp. 179-96 (pp. 181-82). *The Art-Union*’s review provoked a furious response from *Punch*:

MRS. THWAITES—by all accounts a worthy, excellent person—will of course receive what would otherwise appear to be the sneers of a critic—(a critic who, doubtless, would fall upon his knees at a portrait of PRINCE ALBERT’S dog, watching his master’s toothpick,)—as the legitimate opinions of a writer, devoted to the abstract excellence of art. And yet how arrogant of MRS. THWAITES to have her diamonds—the diamonds “not borrowed, but *bought*”—painted and exhibited among the gems of the superior classes, for

while other commentators were even more offensive:

A. E. Chalon [...] has presented us with an immense portrait of a lady in a flaxen wig, who has passed her grand climacteric, and who looks about as corpulent in the shadow as she is stated to be substantial in the flesh, and solid in the pocket. We admire all the accessories of the drawing-room, at which Chalon is ever “au fait;” but positively were the lady out of the room, we are ungallant enough to fancy that it would show it off to augmented advantage. The name of the attractive millionaire, with hundreds of thousands of charms, will be found by reference to the catalogue.<sup>68</sup>

Two years later, the exhibition contained a portrait by Francis Grant of George Hudson, the ‘Railway King’ (figure 3.9). *The Observer* described it as ‘a common-looking portrait of a

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many of which valuables, it may be, no receipt was ever given!  
([Douglas Jerrold], “Personality” of Punch’, *Punch*, vol. 8, no. 205 (June 14 1845), p. 256).

<sup>68</sup> ‘The British Exhibition’, *The Era*, vol. 7, no. 346 (May 11 1845), p. 6.



Figure 3.9: Francis Grant, *George Hudson* (1846), oil on canvas, 239.0 × 147.0 cm (Monkwearmouth Station Museum, on loan from Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens) (Image © Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens).

common-looking person’,<sup>69</sup> and *The Fine Arts’ Journal* as ‘the very *beau ideal* of a hopulent man’.<sup>70</sup> *The Times* wrote that

No. 207 seems a familiar face, and suggests to the looker on the fancy that he must have known the sitter somewhere as the landlord or head waiter of a provincial hotel, although it is all the while a life-like portrait of Mr. George Hudson, M.P.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Royal Academy (Third Notice)’, *The Observer*, May 23 1847, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Fine Arts’ Journal*, vol. 1, no. 27 (May 8 1847), pp. 422-25 (p. 425).

<sup>71</sup> ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Times*, no. 19538 (May 1 1847), p. 6.

*The Athenæum* struck the same note, suggesting that Grant's picture 'gives the idea of a reprov'd licensed victualler receiving discommendation for an extortionate bill or adulterated sherry',<sup>72</sup> and *The Satirist*, writing in 1849 after Hudson's financial crash and disgrace, felt able to go even further:

Mr. Grant was invited last year to paint the Plutus of the day, Mr. Hudson, M.P., &c., &c., &c., and he performed the disagreeable task with great credit. He preserved the features of the man and he preserved his own reputation. [...] Mr. Grant had to paint a vulgar, thickset, low-bred, offensive person, while, at the same time, he had to produce a picture sufficiently good as a likeness to maintain his well-earned reputation. In this effort he succeeded, and although he could not have painted a perfectly faithful portrait of Mr. Hudson, that would not have been an exceedingly offensive exhibition, still he had the judgment to steer a medium course, and not make it more offensive than was absolutely necessary.<sup>73</sup>

As these responses to his portrait of one who was not a gentleman indicate, Francis Grant, surely the model for Tom Taylor's 'elegant and gentlemanly creature, FLIMSY, A.R.A.', was in 1851 the most celebrated painter of conventional Academic portraits of the upper classes. Grant, who had just been elected a full Royal Academician at the time of the 1851 exhibition, was, as Taylor's epithets suggest, both a gentleman by birth (Lord Melbourne described him succinctly to Queen Victoria as 'a very good-looking man, was a gentleman, married a Miss Norman, spent all his fortune and now paints for money')<sup>74</sup> and the inheritor of Sir Thomas Lawrence's mantle as painter to the aristocracy. He was 'peculiarly the painter of ladies and gentlemen':<sup>75</sup> his exhibition pictures in 1849 included portraits of Lady Cremorne, the Countess of Zetland, Viscount Hardinge, the Earl of Wilton, and the Marquis of Granby, and in 1850 Lady Elizabeth Wells, Countess Bruce, Viscount Hardinge (again), Earl Strafford,

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<sup>72</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Athenæum*, no. 1020 (May 15 1847), pp. 526-28 (p. 527).

<sup>73</sup> 'The Royal Academy. Second Notice', *The Satirist*, no. 895 (May 19 1849), p. 237.

<sup>74</sup> Queen Victoria's journal, November 24 1838: The Royal Archives, VIC/MAIN/QVJ (W), Lord Esher's Typescripts, vol. 8, p. 284.

<sup>75</sup> 'The Royal Academy Exhibition (Concluding Notice)', *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 8, no. 213 (May 30 1846), pp. 359-60 (p. 359).

and the Duke of Devonshire. Notorious for its formulaic repetitiveness – in the words of a reviewer of the exhibition of 1847, Grant’s ‘manner is just what it was. No. 510 [...], *Mr. Sidney Herbert*, is a fac-simile of twenty other gentlemen from the same easel’<sup>76</sup> – Grant’s work was almost invariably reviewed in terms of class and breeding, both his and his sitters’: ‘A gentleman by birth, fortune, and education, you see in his pictures the well-bred air of one who is fully alive to the ease and charms of good breeding. There is the well-born appearance [...] about all his portraits.’<sup>77</sup> And despite the praise lavished on his portraits of well-born male sitters – he was said to ‘imbue his figures with the character of the gentleman’<sup>78</sup> and ‘to catch that refined feeling which marks the gentleman’<sup>79</sup> – Grant was above all acclaimed for knowing ‘how to represent a *lady*’; possessed of ‘an intimate acquaintance with all the elements of beauty, grace, and fashion’ on account of his ‘refinement, and [...] intercourse with good society’, he had the ability to ‘discern, seize, and fix on his canvass the subtle spirit which constitutes a *gentlewoman* [...] in individuality, in ease of attitude, gentleness of expression, and in a lady-like repose and self-possession’.<sup>80</sup>

It has been said of Mr. Grant that he is the only man who can paint a gentleman. [...] [W]e are disposed to go further, and say that he is the only man who can paint a lady. His graceful lines, transparent colour, and the light free handling of his brush, are qualities highly necessary for the difficult task of shadowing ladies of “high degree.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy [Second Notice]’, *The Critic*, vol. 5, no. 124 (May 15 1847), pp. 393-94 (p. 394); see also Alten Maler, ‘Academies and Exhibitions. The Royal Scottish Academy’, *Hogg’s Instructor*, [3<sup>rd</sup> series] vol. 2 (January-June 1854), pp. 332-343 (p. 338) (Grant’s portraits of ladies ‘all bear[...] a remarkable resemblance to each other, with only so much of individuality about them as prevents their all being mistaken for paintings from the same model’).

<sup>77</sup> ‘The Royal Academy’, *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 18, no. 474 (March 15 1851), p. 219; see also ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy (Third Notice)’, *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 12, no. 317 (May 20 1848), pp. 327-28 (p. 328) (‘There is always a grace and an air of good breeding in everything Mr. Grant paints’).

<sup>78</sup> ‘Eightieth Exhibition of the Royal Academy [Second Notice]’, *The Examiner*, no. 2103 (May 20 1848), p. 325.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, 1849’, Supplement to *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 14, nos. 372-373 (May 26 1849), pp. 345-51 and 356-57 (p. 347).

<sup>80</sup> ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Examiner*, no. 1635 (June 2 1839), pp. 343-44 (p. 343).

<sup>81</sup> ‘Royal Academy Exhibition (Third Notice)’, *The English Gentleman*, no. 57 (May 23 1846), pp. 4-5 (p. 4).

Against that background, it comes as no surprise that when in *Basil* Collins represents Basil's unquestionably well-born and ladylike sister Clara as if she were the subject of an Academic portrait, his representation should specifically call to mind the portraiture of Francis Grant.

Although Collins claimed to have drawn the characters of *Basil* "“from the living model”" (vol. I, p. x), no contemporary could have believed that to be true of the members of the narrator's immediate family, all of whom seem to be derived from the conventions of the novel rather than from Collins's own experience.<sup>82</sup> Basil's father's only identified attribute is his 'pride of caste' (vol. II, p. 225), and, as at least one reviewer noted, such 'one-ideal' characterisation is itself unrealistic:

Is Basil's father intended to be a type of an English county member? if so, it is a most imperfect sketch. No doubt there are M.P.'s quite as cocktailed over the length and supposed purity of their family descent; but this absurd conceit is quite compatible with other faults, and is generally accompanied by them [...].

As it was, the 'mere thwarting of such folly, through the disgrace of a son' was 'the oldest and one of the most uninteresting of novel incidents', 'the dreary and stale exhibition of an old fool being overwhelmed by the fact of his son having married a shopkeeper's daughter'.<sup>83</sup>

As for Basil's brother Ralph, although he appears to be only two or three years older than Basil – they 'were educated together', and Basil was Ralph's 'favourite butt, both at school and at college' (vol. I, pp. 54-55) – he too is a stock character from an era earlier than the 'modern life' promised by Collins's subtitle. 'In town', Ralph

haunted the theatres, behind the scenes as well as before, entertained actors and

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<sup>82</sup> That said, it should perhaps be noted that Émile Forgues suggested in a long and laudatory review of Collins's early work – written, as Collins said when dedicating *The Queen of Hearts* to Forgues in 1859, '[a]t a time when French readers were altogether unaware of the existence of any books of my writing' (Wilkie Collins, *The Queen of Hearts* (3 vols) (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1859), vol. I, p. i) – that 'M. Wilkie Collins a choisi le héros de son second ouvrage dans le sein de cette aristocratie anglaise si peu accessible aux écrivains de profession, mais que les nombreuses relations de son père ont dû l'aider à bien connaître' (Collins 'took the hero of his second work from the inner circle of that English aristocracy which it is so hard for professional writers to gain access to, but which his father's numerous connections must have helped him to know well') (E.-D. Forgues, 'Études sur le roman anglais. William Wilkie Collins', *Revue des deux mondes*, seconde série de la nouvelle période vol. 12, no. 4 (November 15 1855), pp. 815-48 (p. 825)).

<sup>83</sup> 'Basil: a Story of Modern Life', *The Age*, no. 32 (January 8 1853), p. 6.

actresses at Richmond; ascended in balloons at Vauxhall; went about with detective policemen, seeing life among pickpockets and housebreakers; belonged to a whist club, a supper club, a catch club, a boxing club, a pic-nic club, an amateur theatrical club (vol. I, pp. 57-58).

On the Continent, having had an attaché's place in an embassy procured for him, Ralph becomes a Byronic figure, 'positively illustrious in foreign society':

He had fought a duel; he had imported a new dance from Hungary; he had contrived to get the smallest groom that ever was seen behind a cabriolet; he had carried off the reigning beauty among the opera dancers of the day from all competitors; a great French cook had composed a great French dish, and christened it by his name; he was understood to be the "unknown friend," to whom a literary Polish countess had dedicated her "Letters against the restraint of the Marriage Tie;" a female German metaphysician, sixty years old, had fallen (Platonically) in love with him, and had taken to writing erotic romances in her old age (vol. I, pp. 60-61).

Basil's sister Clara is no more drawn "from the living model" than her father and her eldest brother; in the words of *The Literary Gazette*, she is 'admirable throughout, but sisters of her stamp are too common in works of fiction to excite much interest'.<sup>84</sup> Like Ralph, Clara is a type rather than an individual, in her case the type of a 'kind, gentle, happy young English girl' (vol. I, p. 80). She too is a figure from a previous era; indeed, she is explicitly said to be the opposite of the women to be found 'amid the wretched flippancies and hypocrisies of modern society':

We live in an age when too many women appear to be ambitious of morally unsexing themselves before society, by aping the language and the manners of men—especially in reference to that miserable modern dandyism of demeanour, which aims at repressing all betrayal of warmth of feeling; which abstains from displaying any enthusiasm on any subject whatever; which, in short, labours to make the fashionable imperturbability of the face, the faithful reflection of the fashionable imperturbability of the mind. Women of this exclusively modern order like to use slang expressions in their conversation; assume a bastard-masculine abruptness in their manners, a bastard-masculine licence in their opinions; affect to ridicule those outward developments of feeling which pass under the general appellation of "sentiment." Nothing impresses, agitates, amuses, or delights them in a hearty, natural, womanly way. Sympathy looks ironical, if they ever show it: love seems to be an affair of calculation, or mockery, or contemptuous sufferance, if they ever feel it. This sort of thing is considered to be a spirited rivalry for social pre-eminence and liberty with men, a glorious abnegation of the old-fashioned conventionalities of nature; a triumphant denial (whatever the physical differences may be) of any moral or intellectual difference between the

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<sup>84</sup> 'Basil: a Story of Modern Life', *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1871 (November 27 1852), pp. 871-72 (p. 872).

sexes!

To women, whose manners and feelings are regulated by such ideas as these, my sister Clara presented as complete a contrast as could well be conceived (vol. I, pp. 75-78).

Clara's conventionally old-fashioned nature is matched by her appearance. In contrast to his detailed description of Margaret Sherwin, discussed later in this chapter, Basil gives only a brief sketch of his sister's looks. (Indeed, in an age when descriptions of the appearance of fictional heroines were becoming ever more particularised – 'In the early nineteenth-century novel the heroine is not often described in any particular detail', whereas 'From 1830 to 1860 more and more detail gradually replaces vague description until finally in the 1860s the reader is often given an virtual inventory of the heroine's features'<sup>85</sup> – the very vagueness of Basil's account of Clara's appearance suggests that she is a character from a novel of an earlier period.) Nonetheless, it is sufficient to establish that Clara, aptly said by Walter de la Mare to be 'as colourless as Agnes [Wickfield, David Copperfield's second wife]',<sup>86</sup> is both literally colourless – there is an 'absence of any colour in her complexion' (vol. I, p. 73) – and possessed of the fair hair, blue eyes, and unassertive chin ('The lower part of her face is rather too small for the upper' (vol. I, p. 73)) that conform to her traditionally feminine nature.<sup>87</sup> It is appropriate, then, that Basil's strongly visual final description of his sister should be reminiscent of one of Francis Grant's formulaic portraits of upper-class ladies,

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<sup>85</sup> Jeanne Fahnestock, 'The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Spring 1981), pp. 325-50 (pp. 326; 328).

<sup>86</sup> Walter de la Mare, 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins', in *The Eighteen-Sixties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. John Drinkwater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 51-101 (p. 80).

<sup>87</sup> Jessica Cox notes that Basil's description of Clara is strikingly similar to Walter Hartright's description of the equally passive and conventionally feminine Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* (quoted in chapter 5 below) – not only does Laura also have blue eyes, but the lower part of her face also 'is too delicately refined away towards the chin to be in full and fair proportion with the upper part' (Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 49) – and sees Clara as an example of the 'depictions of the conventional Victorian feminine ideal' with which Collins's novels are 'littered' (Jessica Cox, 'Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the depiction of the heroine in the fiction of Wilkie Collins', in *Wilkie Collins: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Andrew Mangham (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 107-21 (pp. 111-12)).

executed as they were in ‘a conventional imitation of the old fashion’.<sup>88</sup> As he is about to leave London for Cornwall, with the vengeful Mannion in close pursuit, Basil ‘turn[s] aside into the Square where we all used to live together so happily, in the hope of seeing Clara once more before I went away’. He sees ‘the figure of a lady sitting alone under one of the trees’:

I stopped—looked intently towards her—and saw that it was Clara.

[...] She was sitting with her hands on a closed book which rested on her knee. A little spaniel that I had given her lay asleep at her feet: she seemed to be looking down at the animal, as far as I could tell by the position of her head (vol. III, pp. 211-13).

This representation of Clara, engrossed in ladylike activity in the open air, evokes two portraits by Grant exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1850 and 1851 (figures 3.10 and 3.11) –

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Royal Academy Exhibition. Portraiture’, *The Spectator*, vol. 17, no. 829 (May 18 1844), pp. 474-75 (p. 474).

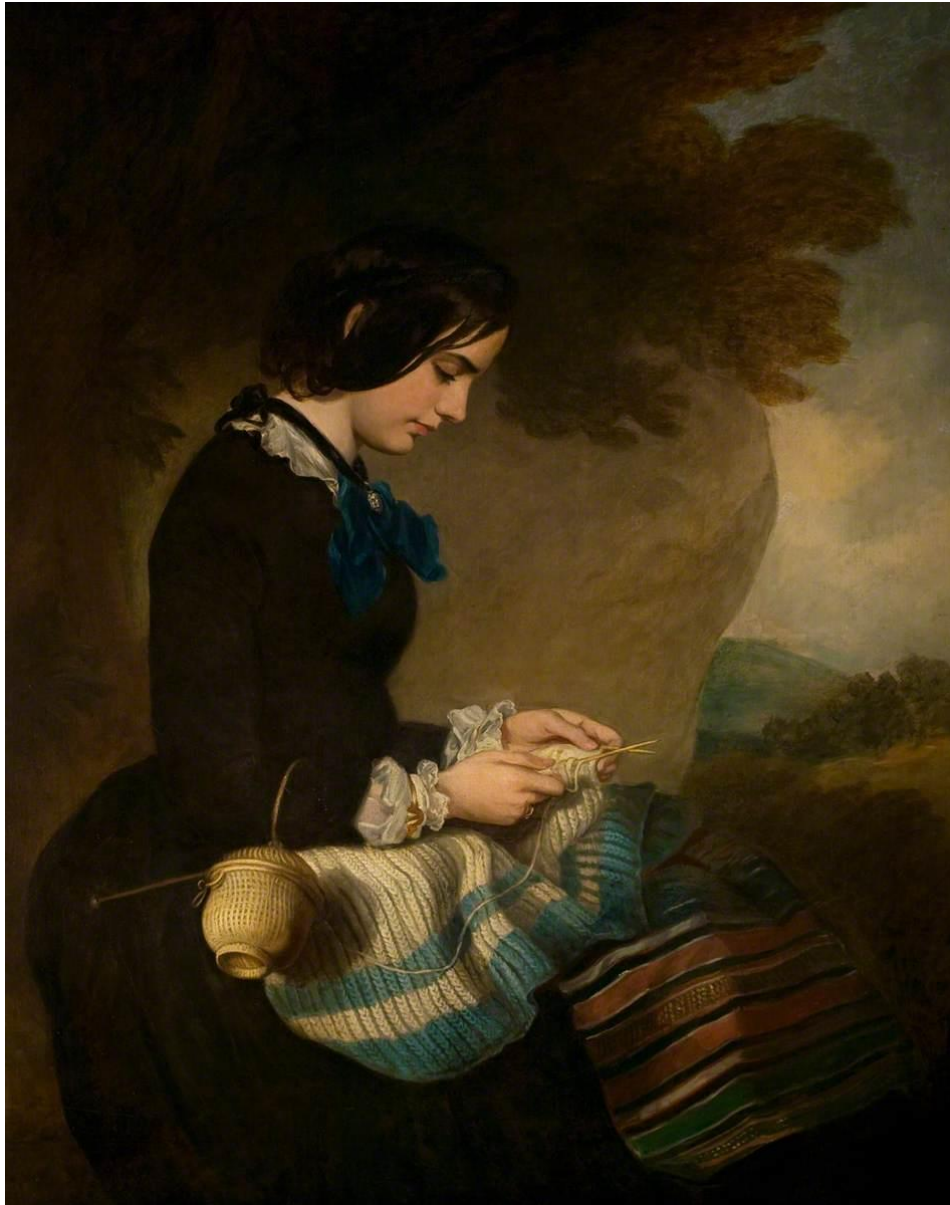


Figure 3.10: Francis Grant, *Mary Isabella Grant* (1850), oil on canvas, 127.0 × 101.5 cm (Leicester Museum and Art Gallery) (Image © Leicester Museums and Galleries).



Figure 3.11: Francis Grant, *Mrs Livesay* (1851) oil on canvas, 139.7 × 109.2 cm (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery) (Image © Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).

the latter of which Wilkie Collins had singled out for praise of its ‘grace and beauty’ in his review of that year’s exhibition<sup>89</sup> – in each of which a gentlewoman sits under a tree knitting or reading, ostensibly unaware that she is observed, let alone that her portrait is being painted.

Basil paints his portrait of the undoubtedly ungentlemanlike Mr Sherwin – after just a few minutes at their first meeting, he sees ‘that it was useless to treat him as I should have treated

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<sup>89</sup> [Collins], ‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, p. 626.

a gentleman' (vol. I, p. 208) – in a very different style. And although Mannion's class status is more ambiguous (when he first meets him, Basil notes that 'his demeanour [...] proclaimed itself as above his position in the world. He had all the quietness and self-possession of a thorough gentleman' (vol. II, p. 28); that impression is confirmed on his visit to Mannion's apartment, when he perceives that Mannion 'had the manners and tastes of a gentleman, and might have the birth too, for aught I knew to the contrary' (vol. II, p. 58)), his portrait of the latter, explicitly cross-referenced to his portrait of Mr Sherwin as was seen in chapter 2 above, is painted in the same style. In place of the idealised facial features and stylised backgrounds that characterise Grant's portraits, the appearance and the environment of Mr Sherwin and Mannion are depicted in exact and minute detail. In what follows, it is argued that in these portraits of characters of 'modern life' Collins is imitating a similarly 'modern' aesthetic of portraiture, one that defined itself in opposition to what Tom Taylor referred to as 'conventional portraiture',<sup>90</sup> the Academic style that its critics considered failed to achieve or even aspire to the truthful representation of character that should be the goal of the painter. In the words of an anonymous commentator in *The Leader*, giving 'a parting glance' at the exhibition of 1852, 'new movements' were observable in painting. In portraiture, there was a 'struggle to escape from feeble imitativeness; that sprightly mockery which attains its perfection in the portrait[s] of Grant', and replace it with something that more faithfully presented a 'reflex of life' by depicting the 'living vitality' of the individual. Noting that 'The old mannerisms of history-painting and landscape are at a discount', the writer went on:

In the portraits there is the same disposition to depart from the fashions, as they were bequeathed by Reynolds, and kept up by Lawrence. The aim is less to reduce the sitter to a particular *manner*, than to sink the manner, and bring the sitter before the spectator. [...] [T]he younger artists feel very justly that the merely imitative reflex of the sitter at a particular moment, gives a far less perfect idea of the being to be represented than art can reach; and hence an effort to introduce a new spirit.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> [Tom Taylor], 'Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Third', *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 466 (June 15 1850), p. 240.

<sup>91</sup> 'A Parting Glance at the Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 122 (July 24 1852), p. 714.

(Other than Millais's portrait of Emily Patmore, discussed below, which was specifically mentioned in the article, it is not possible to identify which pictures in the exhibition the writer had in mind. One of them may well have been the portrait of his stepmother Dorothy by Millais's fellow Pre-Raphaelite Frederic George Stephens, now known only from a photograph (figure 3.12), which is marked by a naturalistic absence of idealisation and a



Figure 3.12: Frederic George Stephens, *Dorothy Mary Stephens* (1852), oil on canvas, 52.1 × 38.1 cm (whereabouts unknown) (J. B. Manson, *Frederick George Stephens and the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers* (London: Privately published by Donald Macbeth, 1920), plate 4) (Image © British Library Board).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Some indication of the vivid colouration of the picture can be derived from a description of it as ‘A portrait,

consequent sense of individuality that are also the principal characteristics of Millais's picture. Other instances of the 'disposition to depart from the fashions' by aiming 'less to reduce the sitter to a particular *manner*, than to sink the manner, and bring the sitter before the spectator' discernible in the portraits of 1852 may have included George Frederic Watts's portrait of Henry Taylor (whereabouts unknown), described by *The Art-Journal* as

a full-length portrait treated in a manner so studiously simple, as entirely to relieve the mind of all idea of pictorial composition and colour. There is also a perfect absence of the usual paint-like surfaces. The head is an admirable study, the features are full of language and benevolent intelligence[.]

and the portrait of Lady Duff Gordon (National Portrait Gallery, London) by Watts's close friend Henry Wyndham Phillips, of which the same critic wrote that 'The work is a study rather of simple nature than of artificial effect, and as such highly successful'.)<sup>93</sup> The hallmarks of the new movement identified by *The Leader*, the means by which its exponents sought to escape from the superficial mannerisms of Grant and his fellow Royal Academicians and restore truthfulness to portraiture by giving a more 'perfect idea of the being to be represented', were the unidealised and unstylised representation of both the actual appearance and the everyday surroundings of the subject. Those two facets of what is called in this thesis an un-Academic aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture will be considered with reference to the contemporary writing of Wilkie Collins and Tom Taylor on art as well as to the work of two of the 'younger artists' who were in Collins's most intimate social circle as

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almost full-length and full-face, of an old lady seated in a crimson arm-chair. She is wearing a black dress and white cap with blue ribbons and an orange apron: a white cloth is in her lap: to the left is a small brown table with an open needlework-box; background, a green wall-paper, and, to the right, part of a mantel-piece and a corner of the gold frame of a mirror' (J. B. Manson, *Frederick George Stephens and the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers* (London: Privately published by Donald Macbeth, 1920), p. [6]).

<sup>93</sup> 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1852. The Eighty-Fourth', *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 4, no. 168 (June 1 1852), pp. 165-76 (p. 173). *The Spectator* wrote of Phillips's portrait of Lady Duff Gordon in similar terms, calling it 'the simplest and severest, without stiffness, in the gallery' ('The Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Spectator*, vol. 25, no. 1251 (June 19 1852), pp. 592-93 (p. 592)), while *The Athenæum* said that it was 'tastefully and quietly painted, with masculine severity, and all that is accidental and unimportant is kept rigidly subservient to the main purpose, the head, which is full of character, individuality and truth' ('Royal Academy', *The Athenæum*, no. 1280 (May 8 1852), pp. 518-20 (p. 519)).

he was writing *Basil* in the summer of 1851.

For Collins, the benchmark for truthful representation of the sitter's appearance was the daguerreotype. It has already been seen that the 'Holbein' in the Dulwich Picture Gallery that so impressed him by its presentation of the character of the sitter in his face surpassed even a daguerreotype in its 'tru[th] to nature', while a portrait at Northumberland House of Edward VI as a child was 'an admirable production; admirable for its uncompromising fidelity to Nature, for its daguerreotype truthfulness and reality'.<sup>94</sup> As Collins made clear in his review of the 1851 exhibition of the Royal Academy, such 'uncompromising fidelity to Nature' and 'daguerreotype truthfulness and reality' were signally lacking in the conventional portraiture of the day; indeed, the climactic words of that review – 'If this be portrait painting, how preferable are the daguerreotypes in the shop-windows!—*they* show us, at least, what the dignity and simplicity of nature really are' – read like a challenge to the orthodox opinion expressed by John Burnet the previous year that 'Giving a [portrait] the exact look of nature, unless combined with the scientific arrangements of refined art, may create wonder in the ignorant, but seldom gives satisfaction to persons of refined taste'; such naturalism might be the 'achievement [...] produced by the Daguerreotype [...] but it is not agreeable to look on'.<sup>95</sup> It was only a few weeks later that Collins wrote Basil's descriptions of the appearance of Mr Sherwin and Mannion, whose meticulous detail evokes the portraiture of a young painter who was one of his closest friends – portraiture that aimed, not at softening and falsifying the truthfulness of the daguerreotype, but at emulating it. When John Everett Millais exhibited his portrait of Emily Patmore, the wife of the poet Coventry Patmore, at the Royal Academy in 1852 (figure 3.13) more than one reviewer noted its relationship to

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<sup>94</sup> [Collins], 'The Picture Galleries of England. Northumberland House, and Syon House', p. 164.

<sup>95</sup> Burnet, *Practical Hints on Portrait Painting*, p. 27.



Figure 3.13: John Everett Millais, *Mrs Coventry Patmore* (1851), oil on panel, 19.7 × 20.3 cm (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) (Image © The Fitzwilliam Museum).<sup>96</sup>

photography. *The Athenæum* called it ‘a painted daguerreotype’, in which ‘the solidity and substance of the flesh will stand comparison with the real living faces of the fair gazers who shame so many of the chalky milk-and-water [...] inanities and unrealities suspended

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<sup>96</sup> The picture has been cut down since it was exhibited in 1852: the first reviewers recorded that the sitter’s ‘hands are engaged in putting together a small nosegay’ (‘The Royal Academy (Second Notice)’, *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 20, no. 560 (May 22 1852), pp. 407-408 (p. 407)) and that ‘the lady is introduced arranging flowers’ (‘The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1852. The Eighty-Fourth’, *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 4, no. 168 (June 1 1852), pp. 165-76 (p. 168)).

around',<sup>97</sup> while William Michael Rossetti described it in *The Spectator* as

striking, and almost startling, for the exceeding definiteness of look, action, colour, and expression which is its characteristic, and for its consequent reality. The face is lifelike in its vigour of rendering, yet has not the shifting look of life. It is a daguerreotype whose production has taken hours instead of moments.<sup>98</sup>

(Patmore himself, who initially evinced 'full satisfaction' at the portrait<sup>99</sup> but subsequently came to dislike it, also compared it to a daguerreotype, writing many years later that 'it omitted all the refinement of her face, & had the truth and untruth of a hard photograph. I keep it locked up as I do not like the children to think it like their mother'.)<sup>100</sup> And although a few critics shared Rossetti's enthusiasm, writing that the picture was 'as extraordinary a piece of apparent reality as anything in the exhibition'<sup>101</sup> and that 'The ribbon, flowers, and flesh, are fully as real as ought in the room',<sup>102</sup> others condemned it precisely because of its un-Academic 'reality'. *The Leader* was particularly exercised by Millais's transgression of the conventional norms of portraiture:

The idea of the Præ-Raphaelites is, to be "natural," "real;" not mannered. Real, without qualifications; not real, though subject to the conditions of the medium in which they work; but real, absolutely; and the portrait before us we take to be meant as a real portrait. We deny its reality. We have not the pleasure of knowing the original, but we deny on the external evidence: we venture to say that Mrs. Coventry K. Patmore does not convey the impression conveyed by the portrait. If she does for a moment [...] look like *that*, it is but for a moment [...]: it was the more incumbent on [the painter], therefore, *not* to pillory his friend in a constrained attitude [...]; not to transfix her in the only look of which she may be infelicitously capable.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> 'Royal Academy', *The Athenæum*, no. 1282 (May 22 1852), pp. 581-83 (p. 581).

<sup>98</sup> [William Michael Rossetti], 'The Royal Academy Exhibition. Portraits', *The Spectator*, vol. 25, no. 1251 (June 19 1852), pp. 592-93 (p. 593).

<sup>99</sup> Basil Champneys, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Coventry Patmore* (2 vols) (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), vol. II, p. 327.

<sup>100</sup> Coventry Patmore, letter to Frederic George Stephens, 30 November 1885: Bodleian Library, MS. Don. e. 72, folios 37<sup>r</sup>-38<sup>v</sup> (folio 38<sup>r</sup>).

<sup>101</sup> 'The Royal Academy [Fourth Notice]', *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26652 (May 27 1852), p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> 'A Visit to the Royal Academy', *The Star of Freedom*, vol. 1, no. 4 (May 29 1852), p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> 'Royal Academy Exhibition (Second Notice.) The Præ-Raphaelite Brethren', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 112 (May 15 1852), pp. 474-75 (p. 474); see also 'A Parting Glance at the Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 122 (July 24 1852), p. 714 ('[F]ollowing the [...] dictate of Præ-Raphaelitism', Millais 'has

There is more than an echo here of the critical response to the only previous portrait that Millais had shown at the Academy, a picture of the Oxford picture dealer James Wyatt with his young granddaughter Mary, exhibited in 1850 under the title *Portrait of a Gentleman and his Grandchild* (figure 3.14). On that occasion W. M. Rossetti was the only reviewer to praise



Figure 3.14: John Everett Millais, *James Wyatt and his Granddaughter, Mary Wyatt* (1849), oil on panel, 35.5 × 45.1 cm (Private Collection) (Image © Owner).

Millais's picture, describing it as 'remarkable for characteristic truth'.<sup>104</sup> *The Morning Post*, by contrast, called it 'sufficient in itself to convince any one of the false nature of [the Pre-Raphaelites'] study',<sup>105</sup> while *The Art-Journal* wrote:

The principal figure is dressed in black and seated in an armchair looking at the

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endeavoured to fix the unfortunate subject of his operations in that purely mechanical mirror, which is so unjust to her amiable and intellectual qualities; [...] we believe [...] that the work [...] is a perfect libel on the original').

<sup>104</sup> [William Michael Rossetti], 'The Royal Academy Exhibition [Fourth Notice]', *The Critic*, vol. 9, no. 223 (July 15 1850), pp. 359-61 (p. 360).

<sup>105</sup> 'Fine Arts', *The Morning Post*, no. 23852 (May 22 1850), p. 5.

spectator; the child has thrown herself playfully down on his knee. The features of both are painted with the nicety of miniature, but in the face of the principal there is much that wants softening and modification. The colour is coarse, and the lower part of the face requires treatment; it may be like the sitter, but nevertheless it should not have been left thus in a portrait. The figure of the child is stiff and hard. We know the powers of the artist, but there is nothing in this work to justify the belief that he ever saw a model set.<sup>106</sup>

Like *The Leader's* criticism of *Mrs Coventry Patmore*, *The Art-Journal's* criticism of *James Wyatt and his Granddaughter* evinces an almost wilful misunderstanding of what Millais was attempting to achieve in his portrayal of Wyatt's face, described by Marion Spielmann shortly after the artist's death as being as 'unflinchingly true and as matter-of-fact [...] as the flowers in the room and in the garden, or the family china in the case behind him. It has all been set down with pitiless and remorseless solicitude'.<sup>107</sup> As with his picture of Emily Patmore, Millais was seeking to paint a portrait that was true to its subject rather than to conform to the dictates of Academic portraiture. By the standards of Millais's aesthetic, if the artist's representation is 'like the sitter', then it *should* be 'left thus in a portrait': to do otherwise would be to fail to be truthful. Similarly, if that representation faithfully captures the pose of the child, then it is immaterial that it does not conform to the pose of a model 'set' in the studio. The observation that *The Builder* made about the figures in Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* (Tate Britain, London) in the same exhibition, that it was an 'affectation' of the artist to effect 'the most literal depiction' of his models 'without in the least endeavouring to idealize, in order to impress the notion of "truth"',<sup>108</sup> could equally be applied to *James Wyatt and his Granddaughter*. Indeed, Millais's picture explicitly distinguishes itself from the idealised and untruthful portraiture of the Royal Academy: on the wall behind the sitter hangs a conventionally Academic portrait of his daughter Eliza, the

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<sup>106</sup> 'The Royal Academy', *The Art-Journal*, vol. 12, no. 144 (June 1 1850), pp. 165-78 (p. 173).

<sup>107</sup> M. H. Spielmann, *Millais And His Works, with special reference to the exhibition at the Royal Academy 1898* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1898), pp. 87-88.

<sup>108</sup> 'The Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Builder*, vol. 8, no. 382 (June 1 1850), pp. 255-56 (p. 256).

child's mother, by William Boxall R.A., whose “dreamy, romantic” image of Eliza provides a stylistic foil to Millais's own obsessively detailed and deliberately stilted presentation’,<sup>109</sup> to the extent that Paul Barlow is justified in calling Millais's work ‘virtually [a] manifesto[.] of Pre-Raphaelitism’.<sup>110</sup>

Although Wilkie Collins is unlikely to have known Millais's portrait of Emily Patmore at the time that he was writing *Basil*, he was undoubtedly aware of Millais's aesthetic of portraiture: not only would he have seen *James Wyatt and his Granddaughter* at the Royal Academy in 1850, but he had himself been painted by Millais in the same year (figure 3.15). Millais's

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<sup>109</sup> Catherine Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 103, quoting Malcolm Warner, catalogue entry for John Everett Millais, *Eliza Wyatt and her Daughter, Sarah* (1850) (Tate Gallery, London) in Peter Funnell, Malcolm Warner, Kate Flint, H. C. G. Matthew, Leonée Ormond, *Millais: Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1999), p. 72. Roach's analysis deserves to be quoted in full:

Millais makes his case at the level of facture: while the Boxall painting is more defined than the two smaller works to the side (for example, Eliza's facial features are clearly visible), the rendering is still much more fluid than Millais's facture elsewhere. In the painting-within-a-painting, loose brushwork predominates, especially on the drapery, contrasting long strokes on Eliza's black shawl to the meticulous, almost invisible touches of paint on Wyatt's suit. Moreover, a comparison is drawn between the landscape indicated in the distance beyond Eliza and the presence of nature in the larger portrait: the desultory leaves in the Boxall compare unfavorably with the detailed foliage of the riotous garden realized by Millais's brush. In contrast to the botanical specificity of the garden, with its lush reds and greens, Boxall's landscape is rendered in pale shades of pink and blue. The pink is the same shade as the wall on which the portrait hangs, linking Boxall's work with the interior rather than with the perception of nature demonstrated in Millais's own portrait.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 14.



Figure 3.15: John Everett Millais, *Wilkie Collins* (1850), oil on panel, 26.7 × 17.8 cm (National Portrait Gallery, London) (Image © National Portrait Gallery).

small portrait of Collins is no less unidealised than his portraits of James Wyatt or Emily Patmore. In particular, Millais defies the rule of conventional portraiture that where the sitter's appearance is distinguished by some physical imperfection,

the painter will present a view of the person and features, in which the defect is either imperceptible or modified; for it is his great purpose, not only to imitate what he sees, but to bring forward those points which are confessedly the most advantageous to the representation of the sitter[.]<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Murray, *The Art of Portrait Painting in Oil Colours*, pp. 2-3.

and makes no attempt to disguise either the significant deformation of what Holman Hunt called Collins's 'impressive head, the cranium being noticeably more prominent on the right side than on the left'<sup>112</sup> or the near squint in his left eye<sup>113</sup> – physical peculiarities that contributed to what one who met Collins for the first time in the mid-1850s described as 'something weird and odd in his appearance, something which removed him widely from the ordinary crowd of young men of his age'<sup>114</sup> and that are also apparent in the similarly sized and very possibly exactly contemporaneous portrait of 1850 by Millais's acolyte and imitator, Collins's younger brother Charles (figure 3.16).

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<sup>112</sup> Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, pp. 302-304. In a later passage, Hunt appears to suggest that Millais painted Collins in three-quarter profile in order to conceal this deformation ('[I]n full face the portrait would have revealed that the right side of his cranium outbalanced in prominence that of the left' (vol. II, pp. 185-86)). He must have been mistaken (just as he was mistaken in saying in the same passage that the portrait was painted '[a]t the time that [Collins] was writing *Mr. Ray's* [*sic*] *Cash-box*'): the 'outbalance' is as apparent in Millais's portrait as in the full-face portrait by Charles Collins (1853) (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

<sup>113</sup> As the son of a close friend of Collins later wrote, he had what I knew afterwards to be an unfortunate "cast" in one eye, which troubled me very much as a child, for when telling an anecdote or making an observation to my father, I frequently thought he was addressing me, and I invariably grew embarrassed because I did not understand, and was therefore unable to reply (Leslie Ward, *Forty Years of 'Spy'* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1915), p. 6).

<sup>114</sup> E[dmund] Y[ates], 'In memoriam—W. W. C., obiit September 23rd, 1889', *The World*, no. 795 (September 25 1889), pp. 12-13 (p. 12).



Figure 3.16: Charles Allston Collins, *Wilkie Collins* (1850), oil on canvas, 26.0 × 17.8 cm (Private Collection) (Image © Owner).

Basil's verbal portraits of Mr Sherwin and of Mannion give no less detailed accounts of their subjects' rooms than of their faces, however, and the unidealised representation of the sitter's appearance was not the only means by which portraiture might be rendered physiognomically legible. Indeed, as Tom Taylor wrote,

What is a portrait? The representation of a man, you will say,—but that means the representation not of a man's head, even if you can succeed in *that*, for that is only

part of a man—and a daguerreotype can give it you better than a REMBRANDT.<sup>115</sup>

For Collins, Taylor, and other advocates of a ‘new spirit’ in portraiture, the truthful depiction of the sitter’s environment was no less important as an indicator of character than the truthful depiction of their face. As Basil rightly observes, ‘Almost all men, when they stand on their own hearths, in their own homes, instinctively alter more or less from their out-of-door manner: the stiffest people expand, the coldest thaw a little, by their own firesides’ (vol. II, p. 52), but notwithstanding that, and in accordance with the orthodox view expressed by Henry Howard, Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy from 1833 to 1847, that ‘The great object in portraiture being to add value to the head, the rest of the picture is to be rendered subordinate, but agreeable by every contrivance the artist can have recourse to’,<sup>116</sup> the subjects of Academic portraiture were all but invariably posed in one of the two hackneyed settings summarised by Howard’s successor C. R. Leslie (not himself a portrait painter) as ‘the eternal pillar and curtain, or the conventional sky and tree’.<sup>117</sup> (Indeed, the two might on occasion even be combined, to startling effect: *The Art-Union* expostulated that Thomas Phillips ‘so far outrage[d] good taste’ in his open air portrait of the Countess of Dunraven and her son, exhibited in 1839 (figure 3.17), ‘as to hang a glaring red curtain among the trees of the

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<sup>115</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Second. Of Portraits, or MR. JONES in and out of the Exhibition’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 464 (June 1 1850), p. 214.

<sup>116</sup> Henry Howard, *A Course of Lectures on Painting, Delivered at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), p. 133.

<sup>117</sup> Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters*, p. 291.



Figure 3.17: Thomas Phillips, *The Countess of Dunraven and the Hon. W. H. Wyndham Quin* (1839), oil on canvas, 270.0 × 178.0 cm (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth) (Image © Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/National Library of Wales).

landscape in his back ground’.)<sup>118</sup> Those ‘platitudes of the painting-room’<sup>119</sup> were mocked by Wilkie Collins in a short story written in January 1852. His narrator, an unsuccessful painter, has for seven years ‘vainly sought a place at the annual exhibition—for seven years has modest genius knocked for admission at the door of the Royal Academy, and invariably the

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<sup>118</sup> ‘The Royal Academy. The Seventy-First Exhibition. 1839’, *The Art-Union*, vol. 1, no. 4 (May 15 1839), pp. 65-71 (p. 69).

<sup>119</sup> ‘Royal Academy’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1075 (June 3 1848), pp. 562-63 (p. 562).

answer of the Royal Academicians has been, “not at home!”.

The sixth year, I resolved to turn mercenary in self-defence; and, abandoning high art, take to portraiture. I produced a “portrait of a lady” (she was a professional model, who sat at a shilling an hour—but no matter); I depicted her captivatingly clothed in white satin, and grinning serenely; in the background appeared a red curtain, gorgeously bound books on a round table, and thunder-storm clouds—turned out!<sup>120</sup>

Tom Taylor also satirised the conventions of Academic portraiture in a series of three short articles on contemporary painting that he contributed to *Punch* in the summer of 1850, a series notable as being his first significant writing on art.<sup>121</sup> He began the first article with a call for greater truthfulness in art generally:

I have been to all the Exhibitions now open, and from all of them [...] I have brought away one strong and painful impression—which I must get off my mind.

Is painting a living art in England at this moment?

Is there a nineteenth century?

Are there men and women round about us, doing, acting, suffering?

Is the subject-matter of Art, clothes? or is it men and women, their actions, passions, and sufferings?

I ask these questions of myself, and of my readers—especially the artists among them—because I am driven to grievous doubt about them when I look round the walls of the Picture Exhibitions.

If Art is vital, should it not somehow find food among living events, interests, and

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<sup>120</sup> [W. Wilkie Collins], ‘A Passage in the Life of Mr. Perugino Potts. Extracted, by permission, from the Italian Journal of Mr. P. P.’, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, vol. 31 (February 1852), pp. 153-64; *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>121</sup> Although Taylor had been writing very regularly for *Punch* since October 1844, the only art criticism he wrote prior to 1850 consisted of brief commentaries on the exhibitions of the Society of British Artists and the Royal Academy in 1846 ([Tom Taylor], ‘The British Artists’, *Punch*, vol. 10, no. 249 (April 18 1846), p. 175; [Tom Taylor], ‘A Degraded Academy’, *Punch*, vol. 10, no. 255 (May 30 1846), p. 247). From 1850 he wrote increasingly often on art for *Punch*, and eventually became the sole art critic of *The Times* after the death of Samuel Phillips in November 1854 (see *The History of The Times, vol. II: The Tradition Established, 1841-1884* (London: *The Times*, 1939), p. 439). Taylor told the Royal Commission on the Royal Academy in 1863 that although he had not himself ‘ever followed the profession of an artist’,

I have painted in oil for some years at one period of my life, and I have lived very much with artists. I may say I once lived almost professionally amongst artists for some months in Paris. I went to the *ateliers*, and drew from the life

(*Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Present Position of the Royal Academy in relation to the Fine Arts; Together with the Minutes of Evidence* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1863), p. 469, para. 4349); this was probably while he was a resident Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge in the early 1840s, when, according to a contemporary, he ‘devoted the best portion of his leisure hours to art studies of a practical nature, his easel and his models being as prominent objects in his college rooms as his books’ (John Sheehan, ‘Our Portrait Gallery. Second Series.—No. 43. Tom Taylor’, *The Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 90, no. 536 (August 1877), pp. 142-59 (p. 154)).

incidents?[,]<sup>122</sup>

and he returned to that theme in the final article, where he urged painters to ‘Be as true as you can be. The truer you are, the more you will find your work gets away from the literal, lineal, hard, harsh, and tea-boardy, which belongs to true representation only in vulgar and untaught eyes’.<sup>123</sup> The second article in the series addressed the same issue in the specific context of portraiture. It began with a vividly satirical account of a typical portrait of a male sitter:

CHRISTOPHER JONES is a highly respectable and perfectly common-place man. He sits, habitually, in a square, snug room, with a Brussels carpet, mahogany furniture, oblong windows, with the usual sashes, and a prospect (MR. JONES lives in London) of a common-place row of houses opposite his own, or, it may be, if MR. JONES be so fortunate, a glimpse of the green in a square garden. When MR. JONES sits at a table, he generally puts his legs under it.

But MR. JONES comes to have his portrait painted. [...]

MR. JONES’S portrait is in the Exhibition. Being a full-length, it is well-hung. It represents MR. JONES in his best suit, with a very stiff white neckerchief, which MR. JONES never wears, except when he cannot avoid it, as at funerals, for it makes him feel what he calls “choky,” and he is plethoric of habit. The individual thus dressed is seated in a spacious apartment, one, indeed, of palatial dimensions. The furniture consists of a massive pillar, and a heavy red or green curtain, partly swathed round, partly falling gracefully from the shaft, together with a very massive red morocco or crimson velvet chair, and the corner of a table, on which stands the massive inkstand presented to MR. JONES by the United Club of Benevolent Brothers (of which MR. JONES has been twenty years secretary).

The apartment receives air from a square aperture, without a sash, through which is seen a wild and daring landscape, with the grey trunk of a tree, a lick of brown hills, and a splash of blue sky. MR. JONES is seated in the imposing attitude usually assumed by heavy fathers and stately noblemen in legitimate comedies, with his legs *not* under the table, and very elaborately blacked boots.

The comic tone in no way diminishes the seriousness of Taylor’s point. Mr Jones’s portrait lacks truth; it manifestly fails to capture the individual personality of its subject.

If JONES’S portrait be the representation of JONES, this is not JONES’S portrait—for reasons, JONES never sat in such a room; JONES never sat in such an attitude; JONES would be most wretched under the circumstances in which he is here painted.

Could portrait painters not ‘contrive to give us the man?—for every JONES is a man’; ‘might

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<sup>122</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the First’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 462 (May 18 1850), p. 193.

<sup>123</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Third’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 466 (June 15 1850), p. 240.

not portrait-painting, somehow, contrive to get out of this region of falsehood, into the region of truth—in other words, out of your painting-room into JONES’S parlour?’. Taylor’s prescription was straightforward:

Everything about every JONES, in his ordinary life, has got an impress of himself upon it. Catch him over his ledger; catch him at the annual rejoicing of the “Benevolent Brothers;” catch him in his own parlour, among his children, or reading the *Times*; catch him where you will and when you will—out of *your* painting-room—and you have the raw material of a picture,—full of character, of some kind or other, with accessories—just as disposable and paintable, if you have the eye and heart to see and feel it, as your stock, pillar, and curtain, and table and chair.<sup>124</sup>

In summary, ‘[I]f you have to paint JONESES, you should paint JONESES—real, not impossible JONESES’;<sup>125</sup> only then will the portrait be a true representation of its subject.

Tom Taylor’s advice to portrait painters, that a portrait ‘full of character’ can be achieved only by taking the sitter out of the studio and into their own everyday environment, finds an echo in Basil’s observation that ‘To study the appearance of a man’s dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character’, and although Basil is not a portrait painter, it is telling that just a few years later Collins caused a narrator who is – William Kerby, the narrator of *After Dark* – to say exactly the same thing: ‘I [...] looked around the room to see what information it would give me (and rooms often do give such information) about the character and habits of the owner of the house.’ Indeed, Kerby is a firm advocate of the aesthetic of portraiture propounded by Taylor:

The one great obstacle that I have to contend against in the practice of my profession is not, as some persons may imagine, the difficulty of making my sitters keep their heads still while I paint them, but the difficulty of getting them to preserve the natural look and the every-day peculiarities of dress and manner. People will assume an expression, will brush up their hair, will correct any little characteristic carelessness in their apparel—will, in short, when they want to have their likenesses taken, look as if they were sitting for their pictures. If I paint them, under these artificial circumstances, I fail of course to present them in their habitual aspect, and my

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<sup>124</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Second. Of Portraits, or MR. JONES in and out of the Exhibition’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 464 (June 1 1850), p. 214.

<sup>125</sup> [Tom Taylor], ‘Punch among the Pictures. Flight the Third’, *Punch*, vol. 18, no. 466 (June 15 1850), p. 240.

portrait, as a necessary consequence, disappoints everybody, the sitter always included. When we wish to judge of a man's character by his handwriting, we want his customary scrawl dashed off with his common work-a-day pen, not his best small-text, traced laboriously with the finest procurable crow-quill point. So it is with portrait-painting [...].<sup>126</sup>

The idea that the most truthful portrait of a sitter is one that presents them 'in their habitual aspect' formed the basis of a series of portraits of writers in their studies painted by an artist who was equally intimate with both Wilkie Collins and Tom Taylor, Edward Matthew Ward. Ward was one of Collins's most longstanding friends: Collins had been best man at his clandestine marriage in 1848 and was godfather to his eldest child, and in 1850 and 1851 the Wards were living in Harewood Square, just a few minutes' walk from the Collins family home in Hanover Terrace, so that the families 'saw a great deal' of each other.<sup>127</sup> As for Taylor, Ward's wife Henrietta wrote in her autobiography that she had known him 'from my early childhood' and that by the time of her husband's death in 1879 Taylor was one of his 'oldest friends'.<sup>128</sup> (It is because Collins and Taylor were both close friends of Ward that it is asserted in this thesis that Collins and Taylor were friends at the time that Collins was writing *Basil*, even though there is no direct evidence to that effect.) Primarily known as a history painter – he became an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1846, and would be elected a full Academician in 1855 – Ward also painted occasional Academic portraits, such as that of the painter Daniel Maclise, dressed in his best clothes and seated in Ward's painting room in the regulation red morocco armchair with the regulation green curtain behind him, exhibited in 1847 (figure 3.18), or the portrait, in a different but no less artificial Academic mode, of

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<sup>126</sup> Collins, *After Dark*, vol. II, p. 9; vol. I, p. 33.

<sup>127</sup> Mrs E. M. Ward, *Memories of Ninety Years*, ed. Isabel G. McAllister (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1924), p. 52. Holman Hunt recalled that when he occasionally dined with the Collins family in 1851-52, 'Edward Ward and his pleasant wife would sometimes be of the party' (Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, p. 309).

<sup>128</sup> Ward, *Mrs. E. M. Ward's Reminiscences*, pp. 230; 244.



Figure 3.18: Edward Matthew Ward, *Daniel Maclise* (1846), oil on panel, 45.7 × 35.2 cm (National Portrait Gallery, London) (Image © National Portrait Gallery).

Lieutenant-General Hearsey, attired in the ‘especially picturesque’ dress of the Irregular Native Cavalry of the East India Company’s Service,<sup>129</sup> exhibited in 1855 (figure 3.19).

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<sup>129</sup> James Dafforne, *The Life and Works of Edward Matthew Ward, R.A.* (London: Virtue and Co., 1879), p. 41.



Figure 3.19: After Edward Matthew Ward, *Lieutenant-General John Hearsey* (1855), oil on canvas, 76.2 × 60.9 cm (National Army Museum, London) (Image © National Army Museum).

By contrast, Ward's portraits of writers – Thomas Babington Macaulay, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Philip Stanhope (Viscount Mahon), Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, John Forster, and Henry Hallam<sup>130</sup> – which were not commissioned<sup>131</sup> and do not

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<sup>130</sup> According to Ward's son Leslie, the series also included a portrait of Wilkie Collins (see Ward, *Forty Years of 'Spy'*, p. 65), but that appears to be a mistake.

<sup>131</sup> If Ward did not already know the sitter – Lord Mahon, for example, was an 'intimate friend' (Ward, *Forty Years of 'Spy'*, p. 65) – he seems to have approached them through a mutual friend: thus Wilkie Collins acted as intermediary between Ward and Dickens (see Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 12 July 1854: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 7, pp. 366-67 (p. 366) ('Will you undertake to let Ward know that if he still wishes me to sit to him, he shall have me as long as he likes, at Tavistock House on Monday the 24th. from 10

appear to have been intended for exhibition or sale,<sup>132</sup> form a remarkable series of examples of portraiture in the very antithesis of the Academic style. Although it is unlikely that Ward had embarked upon the series at the time that Collins was writing *Basil*,<sup>133</sup> the frequency with which they met in that period and Collins's interest in art make it quite plausible that they should have discussed their mutual friend Tom Taylor's exhortation to portrait painters to 'get [...] out of your painting-room into JONES's parlour' – an exhortation with which Ward's pictures, painted not in his studio but in the sitters' own rooms, comply to the letter. The difference between Ward's practice in his portraits of writers and the conventional practice of portraitists is apparent from the journal of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who sat to Ward and to Francis Grant at exactly the same time in May 1853: on 16, 19, and 23 May Macaulay recorded that he went 'to Grant's' or 'to Grant's painting-room'; on 18 and 25 May, by contrast, Ward came to Macaulay's apartment in the Albany, where he 'sate all day in the

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AM?'); Wilkie Collins, letter to E. M. Ward, 21 July 1854: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 107 ('You will find Dickens all ready for you at ten') and Lord Mahon between Ward and Thackeray (see William Makepeace Thackeray, letter to Lord Mahon, 29 May 1854: *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray: A Supplement to Gordon N. Ray, The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Edgar F. Harden (2 vols) (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994), vol. 1, no. 1051B, pp. 639-40 (p. 639) ('M<sup>r</sup> Ward may take my head off (I have written to him to that effect) whenever he chooses to operate')).

<sup>132</sup> Richard Ormond suggests that Ward may have hoped to exhibit the portraits in the series together, with a view to selling and engraving them as a group (see Richard Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits* (2 vols) (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973), vol. 1, Appendix, p. 568), but the suggestion is inconsistent with a manuscript label on the stretcher of the back of the portrait of John Forster that records that the picture was 'painted by – Ward R.A for himself: bought by Mr Forster – finished later by Mr [Ebenezer Newman] Downard' (see Ronald Parkinson, *Victoria and Albert Museum: Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820-1860* (London: HMSO, 1990), p. 295). That the other pictures in the series were also painted by Ward 'for himself', and not intended to be sold, is indicated by the fact that they remained in his possession at the time of his death, 25 years after they were made.

<sup>133</sup> Although the portrait of Bulwer Lytton has been said to be dated 1851 (see *British Portraits: Winter Exhibition, 1956-57* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1956), p. 122, no. 389; Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits*, vol. 1, p. 286), it was stated to have been painted in August 1854 when it was sold after Ward's death ('The remaining works of Edward Matthew Ward, R.A., deceased', Christie, Manson, and Woods, 29 March 1879, lot 83), and the date is given as 1854 in the display caption at Knebworth House. While it has not been possible to examine the date on the picture at first hand, the circumstantial evidence suggests that it should indeed be read as 1854. Henrietta Ward wrote in her autobiography that she and her husband first made the acquaintance of Lord Lytton while they were living at Upton Park near Slough, to which they moved in about the autumn of 1852 (see Ward, *Mrs. E. M. Ward's Reminiscences*, pp. 103; 79), and it was in the summer of 1854 that Wilkie Collins wrote to Ward 'I met Bulwer at a party on Monday night. He is looking bright and plump. Now is the time to take his portrait' (Wilkie Collins, letter to E. M. Ward, 28 June 1854: *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 55-56 (where it is wrongly dated '1849 or 1850'; the date is corrected in *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 102) (p. 56)).

room filling it with the smell of paint'.<sup>134</sup> (Like the contrast between Ward's portraits of writers, painted in their own rooms, and his Academic portraits of Daniel Maclise and John Hearsey, painted in his studio, the contrast between Ward's portrait of Macaulay (figure 3.20)



Figure 3.20: Edward Matthew Ward, *Thomas Babington Macaulay* (1853), oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm (National Portrait Gallery, London) (Image © National Portrait Gallery).

and Grant's (figure 3.21), exhibited and much praised at the Royal Academy in 1854,<sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup> *The Journals of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, ed. William Thomas (5 vols) (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), vol. 4, pp. 49-51.

<sup>135</sup> See 'The Royal Academy of Arts', *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 27253 (April 29 1854), p. 5 ('A truly admirable picture'); 'Royal Academy', *The Times*, no. 21728 (April 29 1854), p. 12 ('Above the usual level of portrait excellence [...] perfect of the kind'). Macaulay himself pronounced Grant's portrait 'excellent', whereas he considered that Ward 'has made me uglier than a daguerreotype' (*The Journals of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, vol. 4, pp. 152 (April 29 1854); 51 (May 25 1853)); it is perhaps unsurprising that he declined to sit to Ward again in 1854 (see T. B. Macaulay, letter to E. M. Ward, 27 May 1854: Dafforne, *The Life and Works of Edward Matthew Ward*, p. 39 ('Lord Mahon must have misunderstood me. I am at present too busy to spare a single hour for a sitting; and I am likely to be very fully occupied during some weeks')).



Figure 3.21: Francis Grant, *Thomas Babington Macaulay* (1853), oil on canvas, 75.0 × 62.0 cm (Trinity College, Cambridge) (Image © The Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge).

demonstrates the extent to which Ward's portraits of writers were radically un-Academic.)

Again, in the summer of 1853 Charles Dickens fell ill after having a first sitting to Ward in late May. As he wrote to Ward a fortnight later,

The day on which I was unfortunately disabled from sitting to you was the first of six I passed in bed, where I underwent great pain and became extremely weak. I am happy to report that I am now growing vigorous again, and am on my way to Boulogne. But I fear there is no chance of our getting on with the picture until my return in the winter. My study is dismantled, the carpet taken up, the curtains taken down, and the bloom (for the time being) as much gone off that flower as this one

which indites these presents.<sup>136</sup>

Dickens seems to have understood that the physical presence of the study was as necessary to the portrait as the physical presence of the sitter, that for Ward, as for Basil, ‘To study the appearance of a man’s dwelling-room, is very often nearly equivalent to studying his own character’. In the event, the portrait (figure 3.22) was resumed and finished in the summer of

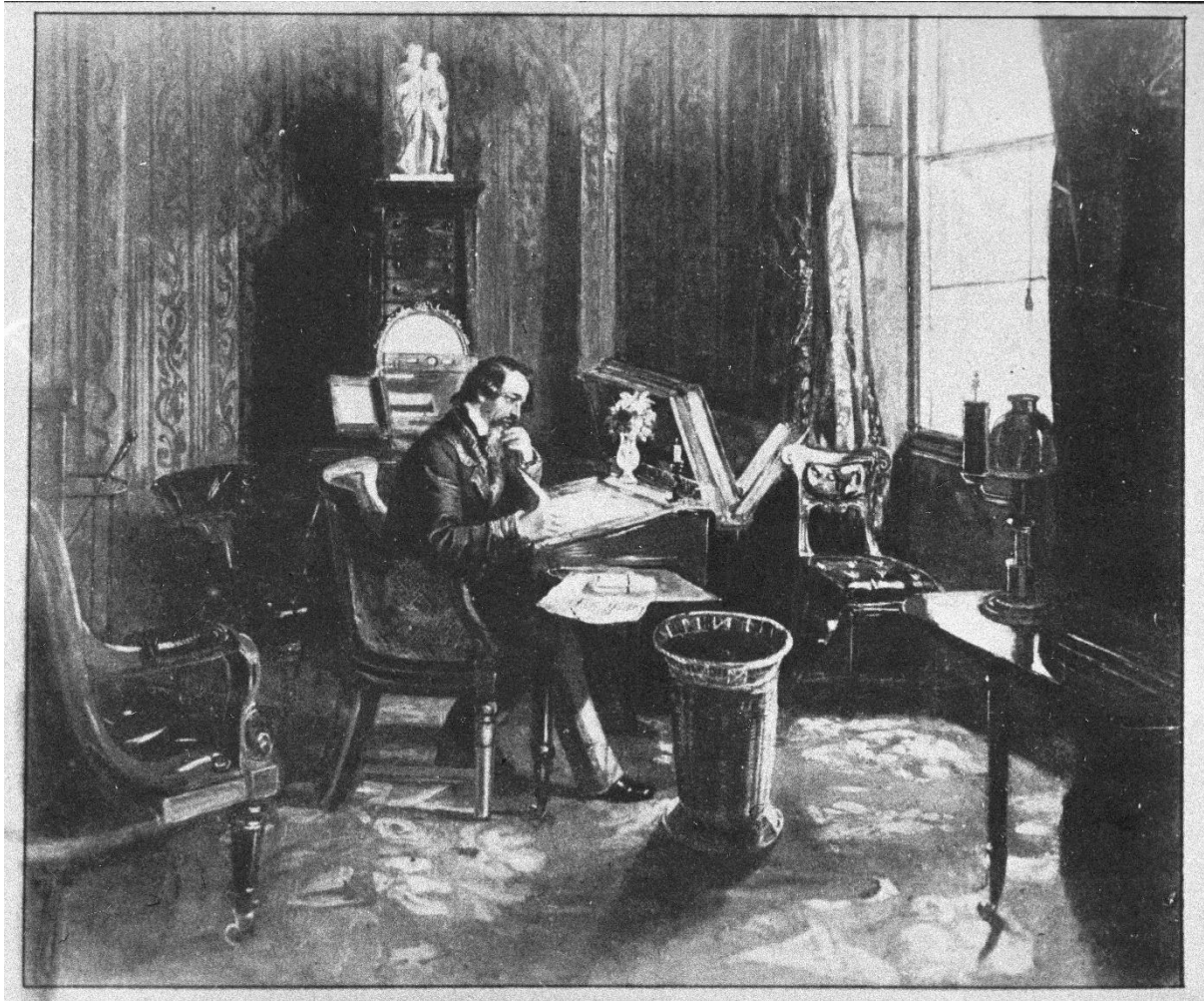


Figure 3.22: After Edward Matthew Ward, *Charles Dickens* (1854), engraving (The Charles Dickens Museum, London) (Image © The Charles Dickens Museum).<sup>137</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Charles Dickens, letter to E. M. Ward, 11 June 1853: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 7, pp. 95-96.

<sup>137</sup> The whereabouts of Ward’s portrait of Dickens, said to have been in the possession of one of Ward’s sons in 1880 (see Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits*, vol. 1, p. 144), is unknown. This engraving, the only known image of it, was made for inclusion in F. G. Kitton’s *Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil* (1890), but proved to be ‘on too small a scale to do justice to the original’ (Frederic G. Kitton, *Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil, and A Supplement to Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil* (2 vols) (London: Frank T. Sabin, 1890), vol. 2, p. 10), and only the figure of Dickens himself was reproduced in the published work (vol. 1, facing p. 65). Kitton’s description of the picture particularly emphasises its strong colouration (‘The brilliancy of the strongly-

1854. There is a striking contrast between Ward's method and that adopted by his friend W. P. Frith when in 1859 he in turn painted a portrait of Dickens, ostensibly also seated in his study (figure 3.23). As Frith related in his autobiography, Dickens sat to him in his studio in



Figure 3.23: William Powell Frith, *Charles Dickens* (1859), oil on canvas, 69.9 × 55.9 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) (Image © Victoria and Albert Museum).

the conventional way, and only when '[t]he portrait had progressed to the time when it was necessary to consider what the background should be' did he decide

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contrasting tints observable in window-curtains, hangings, carpets, and other accessories, is an indication of the great writer's passion for colour' (vol. 1, p. 65)); elsewhere he notes the '[c]rimson window-hangings, blue curtains, [and] green flowered carpet' (vol. 2, p. iv).

to discard the common curtain and column arrangement, and substitute for these well-worn properties the study in which the writer worked, with whatever accident of surrounding that might present itself. Accordingly I betook myself to Tavistock House, and was installed in a corner of the study from whence I had a view of Dickens as he sat writing under the window, his desk and papers, with a framed address to him—from Birmingham, I think—together with a bookcase, etc., making both back and fore ground.<sup>138</sup>

The framed address and the bookcase can also be seen in Ward's portrait, and Frith had the same view as Ward of Dickens 'as he sat writing under the window'; the difference between the two portraits is that for Ward the study was an integral part of a portrait of a writer engaged in his most characteristic activity, whereas for Frith it was no more than the background to a picture of a subject not 'writing under the window' but obviously sitting for his portrait, to be added at the end as an alternative to 'the common curtain and column arrangement'.<sup>139</sup> In the terminology of the anonymous reviewer of the exhibition of 1847 quoted above, Frith's picture is a likeness; Ward's is a portrait – a portrait that is, in Tom Taylor's phrase, 'full of character'.

The importance of the sitter's surroundings to Ward's portraits is further demonstrated by the disproportionately small part of the picture space occupied by the ostensible subject of each picture; as a critic remarked of the portrait of William Makepeace Thackeray (figure 3.24)

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<sup>138</sup> W. P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (2 vols) (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1887), vol. I, p. 313.

<sup>139</sup> In any event, as Caroline Arscott notes, 'The fireplace and mantelpiece on the left do in fact act as the column that Frith claims to have abandoned, so the portrait is not as informal as his description suggests' (Caroline H. Arscott, 'Modern Life Subjects in British Painting 1840-60', PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1987, p. 231).



W. M. THACKERAY IN HIS STUDY (1854).

(From the Painting by E. M. Ward, R.A. By Permission of Richard Hurst, Esq.)

Figure 3.24: After Edward Matthew Ward, *William Makepeace Thackeray* (1854), photogravure (*The Magazine of Art*, vol. 14 (July 1891), p. 292) (Image © British Library Board).<sup>140</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Ward's portrait of Thackeray is said to have been destroyed (see Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits*, vol. 1, Appendix, p. 568). Although another image of it exists in the form of a photograph taken by Henry Hering in 1864 for the purpose of reproduction and sale (The National Archives, COPY/1/6/230), the photograph was originally so heavily retouched and has subsequently faded so much that it reveals rather less of the original painting than the photogravure shown here. One reviewer gave a helpfully detailed account of the picture when it was exhibited in 1864:

"Thackeray in his Study" [...] represents the great novelist before time had quite blanched his hair. He is represented sitting in a very characteristic attitude, in morning gown and slippers, reclining back in his favourite chair, with an oaken desk on his knee, on which he was accustomed to write instead of using a table. His right hand falls carelessly by his side and holds a pen. In his left, reposing upon the desk, is a cigar [...]. On the table to his left are several characteristic articles—a small metal statuette of "the finest gentleman in Europe;" a number of "The Newcomes," at that time in the course of publication; his water-colour box, sketching block, and pencils. In the looking-glass behind him are stuck several notes and cards of invitation, amongst which is an "At home" of Lady Stanhope's. On the mantel-shelf is a small china vase, in which a comic head has been placed, denoting Thackeray's love of the grotesque. On the wardrobe to the right is a bust of Washington, and on the ground a Persian carpet, which he took with him in his

when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1864, a few months after the author's death, 'The likeness is far from good, but the interior of the study is all that can be desired'.<sup>141</sup>

Although the head of Lord Mahon is at the centre of his portrait (figure 3.25), he is dwarfed



Figure 3.25: Edward Matthew Ward, *Philip Stanhope, Viscount Mahon* (1854), oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm (Hughenden Manor) (Image © National Trust Images).

by the massive table behind which he sits, while the eye is drawn away from his face to the bright light of the room behind him. The same is true of the portrait of Macaulay: his face is largely in shadow, while the light that would in a conventional portrait fall on it falls instead on a panel of the door behind and above him. The head of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton is

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#### Oriental travels

('The Royal Academy', *The Morning Post*, no. 28197 (April 30 1864), pp. 5-6 (p. 5)).

<sup>141</sup> 'Royal Academy', *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, no. 3516 (May 2 1864), p. 6. Ward's biographer made the same point when he wrote that '[T]hese portrait-pictures are most interesting works, independent of the likenesses of the eminent individuals who are severally introduced into them' (Dafforne, *The Life and Works of Edward Matthew Ward*, p. 75).

similarly all but incidental to his portrait (figure 3.26): not only is the sitter not the focal point



Figure 3.26: Edward Matthew Ward, *Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton* (1854), oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm (Knebworth House) (Image © Knebworth House Archive, [www.knebworthhouse.com](http://www.knebworthhouse.com)).

of the picture, yielding that role to the yellow cloth-covered table in the centre foreground, but the figure of the man is further subordinated to the pipe, ‘a weapon, or instrument, some six or seven feet in length’ that Bulwer Lytton was apparently in the habit of smoking after breakfast.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, many of Ward’s subjects seem quite oblivious that they are sitting for their portrait at all: John Forster (figure 3.27) is reaching for a book on the shelf behind his

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<sup>142</sup> Earl of Lytton, *The Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton* (2 vols) (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), vol. II, p. 19.



Figure 3.27: Edward Matthew Ward, *John Forster* (c. 1853-54), oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) (Image © Victoria and Albert Museum).<sup>143</sup>

desk; Lord Mahon is studying a pile of papers through his eyeglasses; Dickens is writing; Bulwer Lytton appears to be torn between his book and his pipe. Only Macaulay and Thackeray seem to be even momentarily conscious of the presence of the painter. The spontaneity of these portraits, the sense that Ward has managed to ‘catch’ the sitters – to use Tom Taylor’s word – in the midst of their everyday lives, is enhanced by such details as the figure apparently dusting the glasses on a shelf in the room beyond Lord Mahon’s study, or the pieces of paper on the floor of John Forster’s study that have failed to find their way into

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<sup>143</sup> Although Ronald Parkinson suggests that this, the only portrait in the series whose date is neither inscribed on the picture nor established by contemporary evidence, was probably painted ‘in the years around 1850’ (Parkinson, *Victoria and Albert Museum: Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820-1860*, p. 295), it would seem more appropriate to attribute it to c. 1853-54, when Ward painted the other portraits in the series.

the waste-paper basket, or the sheer mess and jumble of Thackeray's study, with its rumpled carpet and its untidy desk and overflowing waste-paper basket. What *The Art-Journal* observed of the portrait of Thackeray is true of each picture in the series: it brings its subject 'literally and vividly to the eye just as he lived, and thought, and worked'.<sup>144</sup>

Thus far, Basil's verbal portraits of Mr Sherwin and Mannion at home have been considered in relation to the rejection by advocates and practitioners of the 'new spirit' in portraiture of the Academic conventions of idealisation of countenance and stylisation of background. But those were not the only respects in which the practices of the Royal Academy were perceived to militate against truthfulness. Equally disliked by those calling for change was the substitution by portrait painters of a narrow range of standardised facial expressions for the individual expressions of their sitters; in the words of one exasperated reviewer, 'It is not only wearisome, but downright insufferable to have such an overwhelming array of [...] blank faces to endure, each the counterpart of the other.'<sup>145</sup> As *The Spectator* noted, although it was 'momentary expression that constitutes what is termed "a speaking likeness"', whereby 'we see the whole man, not a mere mask of features',<sup>146</sup> conventional portraiture required the 'characteristic expression' of the sitter to be 'smoothed down into a simper of self-complacency or represented by an unmeaning stare',<sup>147</sup> and Charles Dickens voiced the same criticism in 1839, when he had the miniature-painter Miss La Creevy say in *Nicholas*

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<sup>144</sup> 'The Royal Academy', *The Art-Journal*, new series vol. 3, no. 312 (June 1 1864), pp. 157-68 (p. 162). *The Athenæum* made the same point about Ward's portrait of Henry Hallam, whose whereabouts is unknown and of which no image exists: '[T]his portrait is a real biographical study, showing the historian among his books, in his habit as he lived' ('Henry Hallam', *The Athenæum*, no. 1631 (January 29 1859), p. 151).

<sup>145</sup> 'Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Critic*, vol. 2, no. 20 (May 17 1845), pp. 60-62 (pp. 60-61).

<sup>146</sup> 'The Royal Academy Exhibition. Landscapes and Portraits', *The Spectator*, vol. 13, no. 620 (May 16 1840), pp. 475-77 (p. 475).

<sup>147</sup> 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy—Opening of the New National Gallery', *The Spectator*, vol. 10, no. 462 (May 6 1837), pp. 426-28 (p. 427); see also 'Portraiture at the Royal Academy', *The Spectator*, vol. 19, no. 943 (July 25 1846), pp. 714-15 (p. 714) (the salient points of character 'are either softened down to smirking insipidity, or exaggerated into mock dignity, according as it suits the painter's purpose').

*Nickleby* that

“the very essence of a good portrait is, that it must be either serious or smirking, or it’s no portrait at all. [...] Look at the Royal Academy! All those beautiful shiny portraits of gentlemen in black velvet waistcoats, with their fists doubled up on round tables, or marble slabs, are serious, you know; and all the ladies who are playing with little parasols, or little dogs, or little children [...] are smirking. In fact, [...] there are only two styles of portrait painting; the serious and the smirk; and we always use the serious for professional people (except actors sometimes), and the smirk for private ladies and gentlemen who don’t care so much about looking clever.”<sup>148</sup>

(‘Smirk’, ‘simper’, and ‘grin’ were favourite terms to describe ‘the everlasting portrait smile’ imposed by painters on the faces of their sitters irrespective of ‘whatever qualities of mind [they] may possess’;<sup>149</sup> as W. M. Thackeray put it, ‘Our descendants will certainly think the English of the present day a most good-humoured race; they are, in their pictures, always on the grin. Sir Thomas Lawrence left this unlucky simper as a legacy to portrait painters.’)<sup>150</sup> Wilkie Collins’s impatience with the reliance of Academic portraitists on stock formulae in place of the ‘eloquence of expression’ that he so praised in the ‘Holbein’ at the Dulwich Picture Gallery has already been seen in his castigation of the ‘grinning [...] mountebanks’ on display in the exhibition of 1851, and just a few weeks later he repeated his belief that expression reveals the character of the subject of a portrait when he condemned the portraits by Sir Godfrey Kneller at Syon House for displaying ‘the same monotonous conventionality in every face’: ‘It is [...] impossible to believe any of his likenesses to have been characteristic.’<sup>151</sup> Collins put the same view into the mouth of the portrait-painter narrator of *After Dark*, who describes the difficulties he has in persuading those sitters who misguidedly

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<sup>148</sup> Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Paul Schlike (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 115.

<sup>149</sup> ‘Royal Academy. The Portraits’, *The Court Gazette and Fashionable Guide*, no. 276 (May 27 1843), pp. 331-32 (p. 331).

<sup>150</sup> [William Makepeace Thackeray], ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 23254 (May 10 1844), pp. 5-6 (p. 6); see also Michael Angelo Titmarsh (William Makepeace Thackeray), ‘The Artists’, *Heads of the People: or, Portraits of the English* (2<sup>nd</sup> volume) (1841), pp. 161-76, reprinted in *The Oxford Thackeray, with illustrations*, ed. George Saintsbury (17 vols) (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), vol. 1 (p. 588) (‘The last President of the Royal Academy [Sir Thomas Lawrence] is answerable for many sins, and many imitators; especially for that gay, simpering, meretricious look which he managed to give every lady who sat to him for her portrait’).

<sup>151</sup> [Collins], ‘The Picture Galleries of England. Northumberland House, and Syon House’, pp. 169-70.

seek to facilitate the process of taking their portrait by making their face ‘as like an expressionless mask as possible’ to resume their natural expression, whereupon ‘all the little precious every-day peculiarities of the man or woman peep out, one after another, quite unawares’.<sup>152</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that Basil should continue his account of Mannion’s outward appearance, quoted in chapter 2 above, with an account of his expression – or rather, his lack of it:

Such was his countenance in point of form; but in that which is the outward vindication of our immortality—in expression—it was, as I now beheld it, an utter void. Never had I before seen any human face which baffled all inquiry like his. No mask could have been made expressionless enough to resemble it; and yet it looked like a mask. It told you nothing of his thoughts, when he spoke: nothing of his disposition, when he was silent. [...] Impossible to decide, from looking at him, whether his temperament was cold or hot; whether his intellect tended towards observation or reflection! There was the impenetrable face before you, wholly inexpressive—so inexpressive that it did not even look vacant—a mystery for your eyes, your heart, and your mind to dwell on—hiding something; but whether vice or virtue you could not tell (vol. II, pp. 26-27).<sup>153</sup>

When he has Basil insist on the importance of expression rather than the ‘countenance in point of form’ as ‘the outward vindication of our immortality’, the truest indicator of the soul within, Collins is not only pointing a further contrast between Basil’s portraiture and the typical Academic portrait, devoid of individual expression; he is also rejecting the conventional view that the character of the subject of a portrait was revealed through the

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<sup>152</sup> Collins, *After Dark*, vol. I, pp. 41-42; p. 34.

<sup>153</sup> Basil’s description of the utterly expressionless Mannion, with his forehead ‘smooth and massive as marble’ and his brow and eyelid with ‘the firmness and immobility of marble, and [...] as cold’, seems to owe something to Sir Charles Bell’s *The Anatomy of Expression*, a work with which Collins’s friend Holman Hunt was familiar (see Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. I, pp. 100-101). Bell wrote of classical sculpture that ‘it appears to have been the rule of the sculptor to divest the form of expression’ when representing gods and heroes (Sir Charles Bell, *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as connected with the Fine Arts*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., enlarged (London: John Murray, 1844), p. 60), and it is significant that in the manuscript text of Basil’s description of Mannion, the second sentence of the printed text (‘Viewed separately from the head (which was rather large, both in front and behind) his face exhibited, throughout, an almost perfect symmetry of proportion’) read:

As an example of proportion the face by itself was the nearest approach to perfection in a man that I remember to have seen – the largeness of the head both in front and behind alone prevented him from looking like one of the masterpieces of the old Greek sculpture endowed with life (British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 28<sup>r</sup>).

unchanging rather than the changing aspects of their appearance. What was referred to in chapter 2 above as the pseudoscience known as physiognomy in fact comprised three separate pseudosciences: physiognomy strictly so-called, which taught that character could be read from the fixed features of the face in accordance with the precepts expounded by the Swiss pastor Johann Caspar Lavater in his *Essays on Physiognomy*, first translated into English in the 1790s and enormously popular throughout the first half of the nineteenth century; pathognomy, which taught that character could be read from the changing expressions of the face; and phrenology, which taught that character could be read from the shape and conformation of the skull.<sup>154</sup> The conventional view was that pathognomy had no place in portraiture, which was concerned with physiognomy in the strict sense; thus Henry Fuseli – who was a schoolfellow and close friend of Lavater – told his students that ‘Portrait in general, content to be directed by the rules of physiognomy, which shows the animal being it represents at rest, seldom calls for aid on pathognomy, which exhibits that being agitated,

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<sup>154</sup> Although some scholars have suggested that pathognomy should be viewed as no more than a subtopic of physiognomy – see, for example, Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 36 (‘I do not believe that distinctions between pathognomy and physiognomy hold up to scrutiny’, since ‘physiognomy involves the examination of external appearances (in motion and in rest) and so provides an index to internal states, and this builds on the same principles as pathognomy’) – the distinction was fundamental to Lavater, who wrote at some length of the difference between ‘physiognomy, properly so called, which is the observation of character in a state of tranquillity, or rest, and pathognomy, which is the study of character in action’, describing the former as ‘opposed to’ the latter (John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind. Written in the German Language by John Caspar Lavater, and translated into English by Thomas Holcroft. To which are added, One Hundred Physiognomical Rules, a Posthumous Work by Mr. Lavater; and Memoirs of the Life of the Author, compiled principally from The Life of Lavater, by G. Essner*, 20<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1844), pp. 11-12), and was accepted by contemporary writers on the subject; thus James Paget identified three separate heads under which ‘indications of the mental character may be discerned in the body’:

[S]ome will hold that they are to be read in the face alone, which is the art of physiognomy as commonly practised; or in the head alone, as in phrenology; or in the transient expressions alone, as in the ‘anatomy of expression’ ([James Paget], ‘Physiognomy of the Human Form’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 99, no. 198 (September 1856), pp. 452-91 (p. 452)). Indeed, some went so far as to assert that the study of expression ‘goes utterly beyond’ the province of physiognomy, ‘for expression is not [...] the mere straws thrown on the stream to show the course of the mind; it is the mind itself flowing clearly through the face, and needs no signs by which it may be deciphered’ ([Elizabeth Eastlake], ‘Physiognomy’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 179 (December 1851), pp. 62-91 (p. 90)).

or at least animated and in motion',<sup>155</sup> while Thomas Phillips taught that

The real and unchangeable likeness, consists, not in minute imitations of all the changeable portions of the face, [...] which, year after year, we see flitting before us, and presenting perpetual change [...]: it consists much more in [...] the immoveable character which is attached to the general structure of the head [...].<sup>156</sup>

That Collins was well acquainted with Lavater's work by the time he wrote *Basil* is demonstrated by the overtly physiognomical description of Vetrano on his first appearance in *Antonina*:

The conformation of the upper part of his face was thoroughly intellectual—the forehead high, broad, and upright; the eyes clear, penetrating, and thoughtful—but the lower part was, on the other hand, undeniably sensual. The lips full and thick, formed a disagreeable contrast to the delicate chiselling of the straight Grecian nose; while the fleshiness of the chin, and the jovial redundancy of the cheeks, were, in their turn, utterly at variance with the character of the pale noble forehead, and the expression of the quick intelligent eyes[.]<sup>157</sup>

and Basil's description of his father also reveals the influence of Lavater's book ('[T]he masculine energy of look about the upper part of his face [...] redeem[ed] the lower part from an appearance of femininity' (vol. I, p. 52)). But Basil's father, like the rest of his family, is a figure from a previous age, as was seen above, and by 1851 the rules of Lavaterian physiognomy commanded less respect among painters than they previously had, as Elizabeth Eastlake – wife of Sir Charles Eastlake, the recently elected President of the Royal Academy – made clear in a long essay on the subject published that year in *The Quarterly Review*. While Eastlake acknowledged that it was 'amusing to look back a little' into Lavater's 'forgotten volumes', pervaded as they were by 'absurdity', 'credulity', and 'most ludicrous contradictions', she contended that upon close examination the 'identity of the individual' was found to lie, not in the permanent features of the face, but in expression, 'those intricate

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<sup>155</sup> Henry Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting, Delivered at the Royal Academy. Second Series* (1830), Lecture VII: *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie, and Fuseli*, p. 495; see also Lecture III (p. 427) ('Portrait is to historic painting in art, what physiognomy is to pathognomy in science. *That* shows the character and powers of the being which it delineates, in its formation, and at rest; *this* shows it in exertion').

<sup>156</sup> Phillips, *Lectures on the History and Principles of Painting*, Lecture IX (1829), p. 413.

<sup>157</sup> Collins, *Antonina*, vol. I, pp. 55-56.

shades and grades—those crossings and blendings of character’ that only ‘the highest masters of the art of portrait-painting’ were able to represent.<sup>158</sup> At around the same time, C. R. Leslie was lecturing the students at the Royal Academy Schools to much the same effect:

No man can be a good portrait-painter who is not a good physiognomist. I do not mean that he should know Lavater by heart, or that he must believe in all that phrenology assumes. But he must be, what all of us are in some degree, a judge of character by the signs exhibited in the face. A few of the broad distinctions of physiognomy depend on the forms of the features, but all its nicer shades have far more to do with expression; and in this, indeed, the real character is often seen where the conformation of the features seems to contradict it. Socrates had the face and figure of a Silenus, but the great mind of the philosopher must have been visible, through the disguise, to all who could read expression.<sup>159</sup>

Like Eastlake and Leslie, then, Basil is a pathognomist. As was seen in chapter 2 above, he is able accurately to discern Mr Sherwin’s inner nature from his expressive countenance, whereas it is Mannion’s complete absence of expression that causes him to despair of ‘the impossibility of reading the man’s character by a single sign’ (vol. II, p. 35). Basil is not a physiognomist strictly so-called: not only would Mannion’s mask-like face afford a student of Lavater the same fertile ground for analysis as the ‘shades’, or portrait silhouettes, from which, because they ‘collect the distracted attention, confine it to an outline, and thus render the observation more simple, easy, and precise’, Lavater said that he had ‘collected more physiognomical knowledge [...] than from any kind of portrait’,<sup>160</sup> but he sees no significance in the fact that Margaret Sherwin has ‘full lips (to other eyes, they might have looked *too* full)’ (vol. I, p. 117), whereas a Lavaterian would have known that ‘As are the lips, so is the character’; as with Vetrano, large lips ‘denote an inclination to pleasure’, while ‘Very fleshy lips must ever have to contend with sensuality and indolence’.<sup>161</sup> (Basil is not a phrenologist,

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<sup>158</sup> [Elizabeth Eastlake], ‘Physiognomy’, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 179 (December 1851), pp. 62-91 (pp. 66-69).

<sup>159</sup> Leslie, *A Hand-Book for Young Painters*, pp. 288-89.

<sup>160</sup> Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>161</sup> Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, p. 394.

either; as has been seen, his description of Mannion's skull is limited to the observation that his head 'was rather large, both in front and behind'.) Against that background, Collins is manifestly deploying irony when he makes Basil, with his 'unfailing delight in studying characters of all kinds' and his 'aptitude for discovering points of character in others', come to disaster because – unlike the reader – he fails to understand in time what the fleeting expression he observes on Mannion's ordinarily inexpressive face reveals about the man's true character. It is just for one moment in the conversation in Mannion's apartment, where Basil takes shelter while a storm rages outside, that the mask of the clerk's countenance slips:

"Let me assure you again," said I, "that it will not be my fault if Margaret and I do not thankfully employ your good offices, as the good offices of a well-wisher and a friend."

The lightning was still in the sky, though it only appeared at long intervals. Strangely enough, at the moment when I addressed him, a flash came, and seemed to pass right over his face. It gave such a ghastly livid hue, such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features, that he absolutely seemed to be grinning and glaring on me like a fiend, in the one instant of its duration. For the moment, it required all my knowledge of the settled calmness of his countenance, to convince me that my eyes must have been only dazzled by an optical illusion produced by the lightning (vol. II, pp. 72-73).

Only with hindsight, as he feverishly relives the events of the previous year, does Basil come belatedly to share the reader's recognition of Mannion's 'unearthly look of fury and triumph' (vol. III, p. 198) for what it was:

I saw once more the hideous smile of triumph on his face, as I took leave of him on the doorstep: and saw it, this time, not as an illusion produced by a flash of lightning, but as a frightful reality which the lightning disclosed (vol. II, p. 171).

Basil is no less self-deluding when it comes to Margaret Sherwin. His erotically charged description of her appearance when he first sees her in the omnibus is intensely visual. The word 'look' is repeated three times in fewer than 150 words on a single page of the text (vol. I, p. 118), and scholars are justified in noting 'le fétichisme latent dans le regard de Basil'

(‘the latent fetishism in Basil’s gaze’)<sup>162</sup> and calling his verbal picture of Margaret’s body ‘pathologically voyeuristic’;<sup>163</sup> as one puts it, once Margaret boards the ’bus, ‘The flâneur turns into a voyeur’.<sup>164</sup>

There was the little rim of delicate white lace, encircling the lovely, dusky throat; there was the figure visible, where the shawl had fallen open, slender, but already well developed in its slenderness, and exquisitely supple; there was the waist, naturally low, and left to its natural place and natural size [...]. There was all this to behold, all this to dwell on, in spite of the veil. The veil! how little of the woman does it hide, when the man really loves her! (vol. I, p. 119).

Significantly, however, Basil never seeks to paint a portrait of Margaret in her everyday environment; although he does present one ‘living picture’ (vol. I, p. 139) of her at home, it is a genre painting rather than a portrait:

She was at the window—it was thrown wide open. A bird-cage hung rather high up, against the shutter-panel. She was standing opposite to it, making a plaything for the poor captive canary of a piece of sugar [...]. How lovely she looked! Her dark hair, drawn back over each cheek so as just to leave the lower part of the ear visible, was gathered up into a thick simple knot behind, without ornament of any sort. She wore a plain white dress, fastening round the neck, and descending over the bosom in numberless little wavy plaits. The cage hung just high enough to oblige her to look up to it. She was laughing with all the glee of a child; darting the piece of sugar about incessantly from place to place. Every moment, her head and neck assumed some new and lovely turn—every moment her figure naturally fell into the position which showed its pliant symmetry best (vol. I, pp. 134-35).<sup>165</sup>

The closest approximation to a portrait of Margaret that Basil gives is the product of his snatched glimpse when she briefly lifts her veil in the omnibus. It is a picture that should

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<sup>162</sup> Anne-Sophie Leluan-Pinker, ‘L’Indicible et le portrait féminin dans *Basil* (1852) et *Armada* (1866) de Wilkie Collins’, in *L’Indicible dans les littératures fantastique et de science-fiction*, ed. Nathalie Prince and Lauric Guillaud (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2008), pp. 177-91 (p. 188).

<sup>163</sup> Kenneth Millard, ‘My Father’s Will: Self-determination and Mental Breakdown in *Basil*, *The Professor*, and *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*’, *English: Journal of the English Association*, vol. 44, no. 178 (Spring 1995), pp. 25-39 (p. 30).

<sup>164</sup> Wagner, ‘Sensationalizing Victorian Suburbia’, p. 207.

<sup>165</sup> Rightly noting the highly pictorial nature of this passage (‘Collins clearly wants his readers to be able to visualize the action’), Graham Law and Andrew Maunder write that ‘it is tempting to see Collins [...] using the association of young women and caged birds made available by narrative painting’ (Law and Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, p. 70); Susan Casteras suggests that one of the proliferation of Victorian pictures that made that association, Walter Howell Deverell’s *A Pet* (1853) (Tate Britain, London), may itself have taken Collins’s text as a source (see Susan P. Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987), p. 59).

raise questions for a pathognomist, such as Basil professes to be:

She was dark. Her hair, eyes, and complexion were darker than usual in Englishwomen. The form, the look altogether, of her face, coupled with what I could see of her figure, made me guess her age to be about twenty. There was the appearance of maturity already in the shape of her features; but their expression still remained girlish, unformed, unsettled. The fire in her large dark eyes, when she spoke, was latent. Their languor, when she was silent—that voluptuous languor of black eyes!—was still fugitive and unsteady. [...] I thought, as I looked on *her*, [...] how the expression that still hesitated to declare itself, would speak out at last, would shine forth in the full luxury of its beauty, when she heard the first words, received the first kiss from the man she loved! (vol. I, pp. 116-18).<sup>166</sup>

Blinded by desire – as he says himself, ‘From the time when [Margaret] entered the omnibus, [...] [m]y powers of observation, hitherto active enough, [...] wholly deserted me’ (vol. I, pp. 115-16) – Basil ignores the fact that Margaret’s face, like Mannion’s, lacks the expression from which he might hope to learn about her inner nature. Like Mannion’s, Margaret’s face is only once transformed by expression, when she rages ‘in the fury of passion which possessed her’ after a cat kills her canary:

Her large black eyes were dilated, and flashing grandly through her tears—the blood was glowing crimson in her cheeks—her lips were parted as she gasped for breath.

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<sup>166</sup> Mariaconcetta Costantini argues that Margaret’s dark hair, eyes, and complexion, together with her full lips, demonstrate that Collins’s uncritical adoption of ‘the cliché of the dangerous “dark lady”’ is inherently racialised (Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Venturing into Unknown Waters: Wilkie Collins and the Challenge of Modernity* (Pescara: Edizioni Tracce, 2008), p. 217); her argument is reinforced if one also takes into account the precocious physical maturity that contributes to Margaret’s ‘voluptuous southern-looking beauty’ (vol. I, p. 296) – she looks at least three years older than seventeen by virtue of being ‘more formed, more developed [...], than most girls at her age’ (vol. I, p. 244) – and considers those physical characteristics in the light of Collins’s explicitly racialised treatment of them in later works. In *Armadale*, for example, Mrs Armadale, ‘a woman of the mixed blood of the European and the African race’, has ‘the southern richness’ in the colour of her face and ‘large languid black eyes’ (Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. Catherine Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 23), while her similarly mixed blood causes Natalie Graybrooke, the heroine of the novella *Miss or Mrs?* (1871), to be both dark and possessed of ‘remarkable bodily development’:

She had inherited the personal appearance and the temperament of her mother—dead many years since. There had been a mixture of Negro blood and French blood in the late Lady Graybrooke’s family, settled originally in Martinique. Natalie had her mother’s warm dusky colour, her mother’s superb black hair, and her mother’s melting lazy lovely brown eyes. At fifteen years of age (dating from her last birthday) she possessed the development of the bosom and limbs, which in England is rarely attained before twenty (Wilkie Collins, *Miss or Mrs?; The Haunted Hotel; The Guilty River*, ed. Norman Page and Toru Sasaki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 9-10). That said, however, Margaret’s un-English colouring can equally plausibly be read as a signifier, not of Blackness, but of Jewishness. Not only are her black eyes and black hair – as well as the powerfully erotic allure they confer upon her – reminiscent of such beautiful fictional Jewesses as Rebecca of York in Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, but, as Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan observe, Collins’s portrayal of Mr Sherwin, with his black eyes incessantly in motion, his sallow complexion, and his ‘cringing’ manner (vol. I, p. 202) (to which could be added Basil’s brother Ralph’s description of him as an ‘ill-looking human mongrel [...]! He’d be the making of any historical painter who could get him to sit as a model for Judas Iscariot!’ (vol. III, p. 118)), itself draws on Jewish stereotypes (see Dolin and Dougan, ‘Fatal Newness’, p. 11).

One of her hands was clenched, and rested on the mantel-piece: the other was pressed tight over her bosom, with the fingers convulsively clasping her dress (vol. II, p. 82).

As portrayed by Basil, Margaret is indeed a woman possessed by passion; but it is a passion, not of anger, but of erotic excitement. The description of Margaret's expression gives the reader a clue to the sexually passionate nature – the nature that makes her “fit to be any man's mistress—no man's wife” (vol. III, p. 55) – that Mannion has aroused by speaking “such words to her as would have left their mark on the face of a Jezebel, or a Messalina” (vol. III, p. 63). Once again, however, Basil himself misses the significance of what is revealed by expression in an ordinarily expressionless countenance: ‘Never had I seen her look so gloriously beautiful as she now appeared [...]. Even anger itself looked lovely in that lovely face!’ (vol. II, pp. 82-83).

So although Basil's portraits of the characters – Mr Sherwin, Mannion, and Margaret – who cause his excursion into modern life to end so disastrously are written in imitation of the aesthetic of un-Academic naturalism in portraiture that was in the early 1850s being advocated by Collins and his friend Tom Taylor and practised by his friends Millais and Ward, Collins ironically undercuts Basil's portraiture by having him fail properly to read his own portraits of his betrayers, Mannion and Margaret. The next chapter, which discusses *Basil* as a work significantly concerned with the writing of prose fiction, will suggest an explanation for why it is that Collins deploys irony in that way.

## CHAPTER 4: 'THE POETRY OF EVERY-DAY TRUTH'

This chapter notes the extent to which *Basil* is a text that is self-reflexively concerned with writing and the writer, and considers in particular the manifesto for fiction that Collins proclaimed in his preface to the novel. It seeks to identify the inspiration for the realist aesthetic in accordance with which Collins claimed to have written his story, and argues that the most likely source was not John Ruskin, as has been suggested by previous scholars, but G. H. Lewes. When Lewes came to review *Basil*, however, he pointed out its failure to conform to the artistic principles that it professed. The chapter concludes with a suggested explanation as to why Collins asserted so forcefully that his novel was written in accordance with an aesthetic with which it manifestly does not comply.

Whether or not one accepts her view that *Basil* is to be read as 'a meditation on the role of the writer' and its eponymous narrator as 'a figure for the Victorian writer', Tamar Heller is right to note 'the reflexive literary character' of Collins's text.<sup>1</sup> Basil's status as a writer is emphasised from the first line, 'What am I now about to write?' (vol. I, p. 25), and the words 'write' and 'written' appear four times in the first 120 words of the novel. The process of writing opens and closes the narrative portion of Basil's story – '[A]ll objects are brilliant to look on, all sounds are pleasant to hear, as my pen traces the first lines which open the story of my life' (vol. I, p. 29); 'The pages of my manuscript (many more than I thought to write at first) lie piled together on the table before me. I dare not look them over: I dare not read the lines which my own hand has traced' (vol. III, p. 221) – as well as providing the conclusion to the letter of instruction to the editor of his manuscript with which he finishes his tale ('I

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<sup>1</sup> Heller, *Dead Secrets*, p. 61.

have done. The calm summer evening has stolen on me while I have been writing to you' (vol. III, pp. 300-301)), and between those poles appear periodic reminders that Basil is busy putting his story down on paper ('Backward in my narrative, Clara, wherever I have but casually mentioned my sister, the pen has trembled and stood still' (vol. I, p. 70); 'If I [...] knew that, at the Judgment Day, I should be tried by the truth or falsehood of the lines just written, I could say [...]: So be it; let them remain' (vol. I, p. 149); 'No! I cannot write down the words that I said to her. [...] I recoil with shame [...] at the very thought [...] of preserving in any permanent form, the words in which I first confessed my love' (vol. I, p. 179); 'Let me return to my narrative: its course begins to darken before me apace, while I now write' (vol. II, p. 15); 'I must write on, and write all. A few weeks more of my narrative, and the penance of this poor task-work will be over' (vol. II, p. 115); 'I cannot describe that frightful sight [...] though it moves hither and thither before me fearfully, as I write' (vol. III, p. 199)).

Moreover, Collins bolsters Basil's status as a writer by endowing his narrator with his own literary credentials; as Émile Forgues noted in 1855, 'on voit ici s'amalgamer d'une façon assez curieuse l'auteur et l'héros de *Basil*' ('Here we see the author and the hero of *Basil* come together in a rather curious way').<sup>2</sup> Like Collins, Basil has 'engaged [himself] in the hard, but glorious service of the pen', and is ambitious to 'make a name in literature' (vol. I, p. 36) – indeed, he regards his professed aptitude for discovering points of character in others as the principal 'qualification for the literary career on which I was entering' (vol. I, p. 96).

At the beginning of his story, Basil is 'engaged in writing a historical romance' set in a European country (vol. I, p. 90), just as Collins had done, while qualifying as a barrister, just as Collins was doing, that being 'the profession which offered me the greatest facilities for pursuing my project' (vol. I, p. 36). His first sighting of Margaret Sherwin, however, marks

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<sup>2</sup> E.-D. Forgues, 'Études sur le roman anglais. William Wilkie Collins', *Revue des deux mondes*, seconde série de la nouvelle période vol. 12, no. 4 (November 15 1855), pp. 815-48 (pp. 826-27).

the end of his interest in the ‘tranquil, ennobling pleasures’ of his novel (vol. III, p. 113) (‘How could I write?’ (vol. I, p. 145)), and once his marriage has ended in disaster, Basil abandons historical romance in order to write his autobiography, just as Collins ‘abandoned the field of [his] first labours’ in order to write ‘a story of our own times’ (vol. I, pp. vii-viii).

It is in the light of that self-reflexive emphasis on Basil as a writer engaged in the process of writing his own story that one should consider the manifesto for prose fiction contained in the lengthy Letter of Dedication to Collins’s ‘old and dear’ friend Charles James Ward (the older brother of E. M. Ward and husband of Collins’s cousin Jane, *née* Carpenter) that serves as a preface to the novel. That preface is dated November 1852, and was therefore written a year after Collins completed the first draft of the text. In it Collins claimed – however implausibly, given the nature of the plot – that his principal concern when writing his novel had been to ‘[d]irect[.] my characters and my story [...] towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it’ (vol. I, p. xi). ‘As the reading of past realities in books, gave me the materials for making “Antonina;” so the reading of present realities in men, must give me the materials for making “Basil”’ (vol. I, p. ix).

I thought long over what I desired to do, before I ventured to take pen in hand; and on at length beginning this book, resolved (in the painter’s phrase) to “work from the living model,” not only in drawing my characters, but in constructing my plot as well. Accordingly, I founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact in real life which had come within my own knowledge; and in afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, guided it as often as I could where I knew by my own experiences, and by the experiences incidentally related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true, in its progress. My idea was, that the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it. Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards Heaven by taking root in earth. After all, is not the noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth? (vol. I, pp. x-xi).

There is no compelling reason why Collins’s claim that ‘the main event out of which this

story springs' was founded on 'a fact in real life' should be regarded as true. Although Nuel Pharr Davis suggests that 'Wilkie based his novel on the life of the celebrated fourth Earl of Chesterfield and derived almost everything from this source',<sup>3</sup> Shelly Charles argues very much more persuasively that Collins actually derived both the outline and the details of his plot from a fictional source, a short story by the Abbé Prévost titled 'Aventure du désespéré' first published in book form in *Contes, aventures et faits singuliers, &c.* (1764), which is in many respects – not least in its climactic incident, where a wealthy youth who has secretly married a young girl of a lower social class listens from an adjoining room to her seduction by her father's servant on the eve of the long-deferred consummation of their marriage – 'en effet identique' ('effectively identical') to the first half of *Basil*.<sup>4</sup> Even if Charles's argument is not accepted, there is certainly no suggestion in the Letter of Dedication that *Basil* had its origin in something that had happened to the author himself, or even to someone personally known to him; as Collins makes clear, it was only the incidentals of the story that were 'guided [...] by my own experiences, and by the experiences incidentally related to me by others'. Nonetheless, Collins's preface has lured many biographers and critics into varying degrees of fanciful speculation. As early as 1934 Malcolm Elwin felt able to state confidently that 'the incident of the hero's first sight of Margaret Sherwin in an omnibus [...] was doubtless a personal experience';<sup>5</sup> writing some eighty years later, Andrew Lycett suggests very much the same thing.<sup>6</sup> William Clarke goes further, and wonders '[H]ad Collins actually

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, p. 116. Davis asserts that 'Chesterfield's aristocratic views and conscious nobility are the distinguishing traits of [Basil's] father', while 'Basil is Philip Stanhope, the shy, bookish, irresolute son who marries secretly and poorly'; as for Mannion's father, 'The wretched story of Chesterfield's transactions with the unfortunate Dr. William Dodd, whom Chesterfield – too noble to sign his name to a false statement – allowed to be hanged for forgery, is reproduced without disguise'.

<sup>4</sup> Shelly Charles, 'Aux sources du sensationnel: Wilkie Collins lecteur de l'abbé Prévost?', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, no. 65 (April 2007), pp. 135-60 (p. 137).

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Elwin, *Victorian Wallflowers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> See Lycett, *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation*, p. 103 ('One deduction is that [Wilkie] himself had experienced the *coup de foudre* on the omnibus. Although he was impressionable enough for such a thing, no obvious instance is known').

married in this fashion at an early age or perhaps had a similar, though less traumatic, experience?',<sup>7</sup> as does William Baker ('Was there [...] in Collins's own life an early secret marriage that prevented him subsequently from marrying?').<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Goldman strikes the same note, drawing attention to a somewhat mysterious statement in Collins's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, published little more than a decade after his death ('Intimacies formed as a young man led to his being harassed, after he became famous, in a manner which proved very prejudicial to his peace of mind'),<sup>9</sup> and asking 'Is it possible that this refers to a secret marriage? Such a hypothesis would explain why Collins married neither Caroline Graves nor Martha Rudd.'<sup>10</sup> Robert Ashley suggests a more dramatic explanation for Collins's failure to marry:

Ultimately, the central riddle of *Basil* seems unsolvable. However, one intriguing question persists; whether Collins experienced something like the seduction of Margaret Sherwin or witnessed it or merely heard of it, is it at least a partial explanation of why he never married?[,]<sup>11</sup>

and Kenneth Robinson ventures even deeper into the realms of psychological intrusion:

Although we cannot be certain, it is probable that Wilkie had recently undergone a violent emotional experience and wrote *Basil* as a form of catharsis. [...] The course of the narrative suggests that the experience was not a happy one for Wilkie, though it may well have been valuable to him as a novelist.<sup>12</sup>

Robinson's speculation has afforded fertile ground to professional psychoanalysts. Alexander Grinstein, whose book is written out of a conviction that 'in his efforts to surmount his inner problems, Wilkie Collins revealed a great deal about himself in his fiction', observes that

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<sup>7</sup> William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: Allison and Busby, 1988), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> William Baker, 'Wilkie Collins: Scholarship and Criticism: Past, Present, and Future', *The Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, vol. 12 (2013) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26996085>> (p. [3]).

<sup>9</sup> Seccombe, 'Collins, William Wilkie', p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *Basil*, ed. Goldman, p. 273.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Ashley, 'Within My Experience: An Essay Suggested by the Dover Reprint of Wilkie Collins's *Basil*', *The Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, no. 1 (1981), pp. 13-17 (p. 16). Ashley was more cautious earlier in his career, when he observed that 'there is no evidence to substantiate' 'the conjecture that the novel owes its impassioned quality to some deeply moving incident in the author's life' (Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 32).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1951), p. 69.

Basil's overhearing of Mannion's and Margaret's intercourse is a version of the primal scene, in which 'children hear the sounds of a sexual relationship but do not actually witness the act'. For Grinstein, Collins's

description of Basil's fury with Mannion is an accurate portrayal of the fury a child feels upon witnessing the primal scene. Basil wants to kill him and succeeds in destroying his eye, thus symbolically castrating him. The description of the scene raises the question whether Collins himself was party to such an observation or whether he heard about it from one of his acquaintances and then proceeded to write about it including his own feelings, fantasies, and reactions[,]<sup>13</sup>

while Charles Rycroft cites *Basil* in support of his theory that 'dissociation between the ideal [...] and the depreciated sexual objects [...] [was] among the defenses [Collins] used in his attempts to master anxiety', and suggests that *Basil* should be read with *The Moonstone*:

If one views these two novels together as studies in psychopathology, *Basil* can be seen as the reverse of *The Moonstone*. *The Moonstone* deals with the conflict aroused by the emergence of repressed sexual feelings towards the idealized object, *Basil* with the conflict produced by the alternative but inadmissible attempt at resolution, idealization of the inferior, degraded sexual object.<sup>14</sup>

Other biographers have sought to cast Collins's family and friends in the roles of Basil and Margaret. Nuel Pharr Davis, who 'sees autobiographical significance lurking behind every bush in Collins's works',<sup>15</sup> identifies them with Collins's brother Charles and Maria Rossetti, with whom Charles may have been unhappily in love,<sup>16</sup> while Catherine Peters – apparently overlooking the fact that the 'main event' said to be founded on a 'fact in real life' can only be Margaret's deflowering by Mannion, as was well understood by contemporary critics<sup>17</sup> –

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Grinstein, *Wilkie Collins: Man of Mystery and Imagination* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 2003), pp. 8; 71.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Rycroft, 'A Detective Story: Psychoanalytic Observations', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1957), pp. 229-45 (pp. 238; 244).

<sup>15</sup> Ashley, 'Within My Experience', p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> See Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, '*Basil; a Story of Modern Life*', *The Morning Herald*, no. 22033 (December 20 1852), p. 6 ('[The author] has selected as the main incident of his story a crime which excites in us far less of interest or even of terror than of abhorrence and disgust'); 'The Progress of Fiction as an Art', *The Westminster Review*, vol. 60, no. 118 (October 1853), pp. 342-74; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 43 ('The incident which forms the foundation of the whole, is absolutely disgusting; and it is kept so perseveringly before the eyes of the reader in all its hateful details, that all interest is destroyed in the loathing which it occasions'); Edmund Yates,

suggests that ‘The secret marriage of Ned and Henrietta Ward, with its delayed consummation, obviously suggested an element of the plot. More important, and possibly the “fact in real life”, was the involvement of Holman Hunt with his model Annie Miller’.<sup>18</sup>

Very few scholars have acknowledged that Collins’s claim that his fiction was rooted in reality does not have to be taken at face value. Matthew Sweet argues that there is good reason to read Collins’s prefatory claims to veracity with scepticism (‘These initial comments have always been applied to Collins’s fiction with great solemnity, but they are as disingenuous as [T. S.] Eliot’s notes to The Waste Land’),<sup>19</sup> and Peter Ackroyd – himself a novelist as well as a biographer – while accepting that ‘given his proclivities’ it is ‘possible’ that Collins was ‘recounting his own experience’, not least because ‘The only biographical sketch published in his lifetime, in part based upon Collins’s own reminiscences, alludes to an unhappy love affair’, writes that ‘[I]t is also possible that he was exaggerating the novel’s realism as a way of making it seem “new” and “up to date”; he wanted to acquire as many readers as possible’.<sup>20</sup> Ackroyd is surely right to point out that Collins’s claim to have ““worked from the living model”” can be regarded as no more than a rhetorical device. Indeed, when Collins wrote in the Letter of Dedication that the main event out of which his story sprang was founded on a fact, he was making that claim for the second time in the space of a year: he had said the same thing in the revised preface to the second edition of *Mr.*

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‘Men of Mark. No. II—W. Wilkie Collins’, *The Train*, vol. 3, no. 18 (June 1857), pp. 352-57: *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 64 (‘The main incident of the story may appear objectionable to many, on grounds particularly English, and not particularly defensible’).

<sup>18</sup> Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Sweet, ‘Psychosis and the Sensation Hero’, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012), p. 50, referring to a study of Collins’s work that told how as a twelve-year-old boy he fell in love with a married woman three times his age, running away in jealousy when her husband came near, but ‘So komisch die Geschichte seiner ersten Knabenliebe ist, so tief traurig war für Wilkie Collins die unglückliche Liebe seiner Mannesjahre’ (‘The unhappy love of his manhood was as deeply sad for Wilkie Collins as the story of his first boyish love is funny’) (Ernst von Wolzogen, *Wilkie Collins: Ein biographisch-kritischer Versuch* (Leipzig: Albert Unflad, 1885), p. 16).

*Wray's Cash-Box*, dated January 1852. The 'Introduction' to the first edition of December 1851 had stated that the story was based on an 'anecdote' related by 'a friend (now no more)',<sup>21</sup> and went on to recount the anecdote at some length; having belatedly realised that that preface 'forestalls the interest of the story', as 'People who read the preface will find out at once, in the story, before I chose to tell them, that the "mystery" in the Cash-Box, is a mask of Shakspeare – and this ought not to be',<sup>22</sup> Collins replaced it in the second edition (now subtitled 'A Modern Story' rather than 'A Christmas Story') with a shorter 'Advertisement' that stated only that 'The main incident on which the following story turns, is founded on a fact which many readers [...] will probably recognise as having formed a subject of conversation, a few years back, among persons interested in Literature and Art'.<sup>23</sup> In those circumstances, the real question posed by the Letter of Dedication to *Basil* is not whether Collins had in truth founded his story on 'a fact in real life' but why he thought it appropriate to claim that he had done so. It is a question to which an answer is suggested at the end of this chapter.

Those few contemporaries who commented on the Letter of Dedication thought little of it. *The Westminster Review* described it as 'of excessive length and no small pretension',<sup>24</sup> *The Literary Gazette* dismissed it as 'not the least' of the book's 'errors of judgment and of taste',<sup>25</sup> and *The Athenæum* condemned the 'crude criticism' of Collins's 'views of Art in

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<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box*, p. v.

<sup>22</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to J. T. Marsh, 24 December 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, *Mr Wray's Cash-Box; or, The Mask and the Mystery. A Modern Story* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), p. v.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Progress of Fiction as an Art', *The Westminster Review*, vol. 60, no. 118 (October 1853), pp. 342-74; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> 'Basil: a Story of Modern Life', *The Literary Gazette*, no. 1871 (November 27 1852), pp. 871-72 (p. 872).

fiction'.<sup>26</sup> Charles Dickens told Collins that he had 'no doubt that the Prefatory letter would have been better away; on the ground that a book (of all things) should speak for, and explain, itself'.<sup>27</sup> Modern critics, however, have sought to identify the sources of Collins's aesthetic of fiction, in which the Ideal 'spring[s] out of' the Actual: 'Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards Heaven by taking root in earth.' The first step in the process of identification of those sources is to recognise that in treating the ideal as necessarily rooted in the actual Collins was taking a significantly different position to the majority of contemporary commentators, for whom the ideal and the actual, or 'the real', in the arts were not connected but 'two very opposite walks',<sup>28</sup> 'two lines [...] essentially different' between which it was a 'radical mistake' not to distinguish.<sup>29</sup> That art and artists could be categorised either as ideal or as real, but not both, is a point made in contemporary commentary on the drama (*The Times*, for example, observed in its account of William Macready's final performance in February 1851 that

The ordinary categories to which an artist in any department is referred are those of the "real" and the "ideal." Does he represent his subject such as it is in actual life, or does he give it a certain elevation, which while it preserves essential truth, aims not at the imitation of minor detail? If this broad division be deemed all-embracing, Mr. Macready will at the first glance be placed on the "real" side. [...] But how inadequate would the classification be![,]<sup>30</sup>

while the acting of Charlotte Cushman was said to be 'a veritable embodiment of the modern literal or real school of histrionic art, as contrasted with the ideal',<sup>31</sup> on the visual arts (*The*

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<sup>26</sup> [Daniel Owen Maddyn], 'Basil: a Story of Modern Life', *The Athenæum*, no. 1310 (December 4 1852), pp. 1322-23; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 20 December 1852: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, pp. 823-24.

<sup>28</sup> 'The London Exhibitions', *The Manchester Examiner and Times*, vol. 2, no. 170 (June 19 1850), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> 'An Inquiry into the Philosophy and Religion of Shakspeare', *John Bull*, vol. 28, no. 446 (August 26 1848), p. 552.

<sup>30</sup> 'Mr. Macready's Last Night', *The Times*, no. 20716 (February 4 1851), p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> 'Miss Cushman', *The Sun*, no. 17895 (January 31 1850), p. [3].

*Athenæum* pronounced in a review of the exhibition of the Royal Academy in 1849 that ‘The representative powers of Fine Art are manifested either in the imagined ideal or in the actual individual’),<sup>32</sup> and on the novel, as in David Masson’s comparison of Thackeray and Dickens, published in May 1851. Masson sought to illustrate the ‘essential difference’ between the two writers by reference to ‘the leading distinctions of style and faculty in the kindred art of painting’. Having divided pictures into two broad classes (‘landscape’ – inanimate – and ‘figure’ – animate), each containing numerous sub-classes, he went on:

But, independent of these outwardly determined distinctions, and helping greatly to complicate them, are others, having their origin not in the outer variety of nature, but in the spirit and form of thought of the painter. Taking rise in this source, for instance, is the important distinction between what may be called the Real, and what may be called the Ideal, [...] style or theory of art. In the real style of art, the aim is to produce pictures that shall impress by their close and truthful resemblance to something or other in real nature or life. [...] In [the ideal] style of art the conception or intention supplied by the painter bears a larger proportion to the matter outwardly given than in the other. A picture executed in this style strikes, not by recalling real scenes and occurrences, but by taking the mind out of itself into a region of higher possibilities, wherein objects shall be more glorious, and modes of action more transcendent, than any we see [...]. It is observed, too, that artists who favour the ideal theory, usually work in the more ambitious departments of landscape or figure painting; and hence probably it is that the real style is sometimes [...] called Low Art, and the ideal style, High Art.

All this may be transferred with ease to the occupation of the literary artist, or writer of fiction.

For Masson, Thackeray was ‘essentially an artist of the real school; he belongs to what, in painting, would be called the school of low art’, whereas Dickens ‘works more in the ideal’.<sup>33</sup>

Collins’s aesthetic of prose fiction differs from this. He advocates, not the Ideal as distinct from the Actual, but an Ideal that is necessarily rooted in the Actual. That heterodox

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Royal Academy. Portraiture’, *The Athenæum*, no. 1128 (June 9 1849), pp. 601-604 (p. 601).

<sup>33</sup> [David Masson], ‘*Pendennis and Copperfield: Thackeray and Dickens*’, *The North British Review*, vol. 15, no. 29 (May 1851), pp. 57-89 (pp. 68-70; 74); see also Masson, *British Novelists and their Styles*, p. 248 (all the differences between Thackeray and Dickens ‘resolve themselves into the one fundamental difference, that they are artists of opposite schools. Thackeray is a novelist of what is called the Real school; Dickens is a novelist of the Ideal or Romantic school’).

conception of the relation between ideal and real is reminiscent of John Ruskin, who lamented ‘that unfortunate distinction between idealism and realism which leads most people to imagine the ideal opposed to the real, and therefore *false*’.<sup>34</sup> As Ruskin wrote in the first volume of *Modern Painters*,

[A]lthough it is possible to reach what I have stated to be the first end of art, the representation of facts, without reaching the second, the representation of thoughts, yet it is altogether impossible to reach the second without having previously reached the first. I do not say that a man cannot think, having false basis and material for thought; but that a false thought is worse than the want of thought, and therefore is not art. And this is the reason why, though I consider the second as the real and only important end of all art, I call the representation of facts the first end; because it is necessary to the other and must be attained before it. It is the foundation of all art; like real foundations, it may be little thought of when a brilliant fabric is raised on it; but it must be there. And thus, though we want the thoughts and feelings of the artist as well as the truth, yet they must be thoughts arising out of the knowledge of truth, and feelings arising out of the contemplation of truth. [...] Nothing can atone for the want of truth, not the most brilliant imagination, the most playful fancy, the most pure feeling [...]; not the most exalted conception, nor the most comprehensive grasp of intellect can make amends for the want of truth [...].

We shall, in consequence, find that no artist can be graceful, imaginative, or original, unless he be truthful [...].<sup>35</sup>

Ruskin returned to that theme in the opening section of *Pre-Raphaelitism*, published just over a year before Collins wrote the Letter of Dedication. Having pronounced the ‘true duty’ of every painter to be ‘*the faithful representation of all objects of historical interest, or of natural beauty existent at the period*’, he went on:

But is there to be no place left, it will be indignantly asked, for imagination and invention, for poetical power, or love of ideal beauty? Yes, the highest, the noblest place—that which these only can attain when they are all used in the cause, and with the aid of truth.<sup>36</sup>

The apparent similarity between the aesthetic of fiction proclaimed in the Letter of Dedication and Ruskin’s aesthetic of painting has led Tim Dolin to argue that inasmuch as

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<sup>34</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters II: The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 4, p. 164.

<sup>35</sup> A Graduate of Oxford (John Ruskin), *Modern Painters: Their Superiority In the Art of Landscape Painting To All the Ancient Masters* (1843): *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 3 (1903), pp. 136-38.

<sup>36</sup> The Author of “Modern Painters” (John Ruskin), *Pre-Raphaelitism* (1851): *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 12, pp. 349; 352.

‘there was no authoritative contemporary aesthetics of fiction to which he could appeal’, Collins was appealing to the visual arts, going ‘out of his way to explain and justify what he was trying to do in language that might almost have been used to debate Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art*’ and ‘echoing John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*’ in order to associate himself with ‘the most advanced thinking in London art circles’.<sup>37</sup> Other scholars, accepting at face value Ruskin’s claim in *Pre-Raphaelitism* that the Pre-Raphaelites were carrying out ‘to the very letter’ his advice to the young artists of England to ‘go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing’,<sup>38</sup> have made much the same point, suggesting that the Letter of Dedication to *Basil* ‘*mutatis mutandis*, voice[s] the doctrine of his friends the Pre-Raphaelites’,<sup>39</sup> and that Collins’s ‘aesthetic principles [...] broadly correspond[.] with Pre-Raphaelite tenets, stressing a realism founded on the linking of the transcendent and the mundane’.<sup>40</sup>

But although it is generally agreed that Collins was adapting to fiction the aesthetic of truthfulness in painting that was expounded by Ruskin and believed by him to be practised by the Pre-Raphaelites, that scholarly consensus is far from easy to accept. In the first place,

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<sup>37</sup> Tim Dolin, ‘Collins’s career and the visual arts’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 7-22 (p. 8); see also Dolin and Dougan, ‘Fatal Newness’, p. 12 (the language of the Letter of Dedication is ‘the language of the Academy and *Modern Painters* alike, and its application in this context suggests that Collins may be trying to explain his own project by referring to recent controversies in the visual arts’).

<sup>38</sup> John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism: The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 12, p. 339.

<sup>39</sup> Sayers, *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study*, p. 80.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, p. 73. For completeness, it should be noted that Sue Lonoff identifies a different inspiration for Collins’s manifesto for fiction, suggesting that ‘there are predictably Romantic echoes in Collins’s first pronouncement on the art of the novel’, which she attributes to the author’s ‘father, who was casually acquainted with Wordsworth and more than casually acquainted with Coleridge’ and ‘had imparted his own admiration for their poetry and theories to his family’ (Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (New York: AMS Press, 1982), p. 23). But while it is not impossible to hear in the Letter of Dedication echoes of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, it seems implausible that Collins should have been seeking in 1852 to invoke memories of a manifesto for poetry that had been published over half a century earlier.

although Collins appears to have had sufficient acquaintance with Ruskin to feel able to ask him to offer the manuscript of *Antonina* to his publisher, George Smith of Smith, Elder,<sup>41</sup> he had not read the first volume of *Modern Painters* and ‘merely looked into’ the second,<sup>42</sup> and seems to have known of the existence of, rather than read, *Pre-Raphaelitism*.<sup>43</sup> Second, and more important, it is difficult to see why Collins should have felt it necessary or appropriate to appeal to the visual arts when setting out what is emphatically a manifesto for the novel.

As he made clear in the Letter of Dedication, the aesthetic he was proclaiming was an aesthetic of fiction:

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted, and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to common-place, everyday realities only. [...] Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men, seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with, when there was a good object in using them, as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all (vol. I, pp. xiii-xiv).<sup>44</sup>

It is certainly true that in the early stages of his career Collins was prone to borrowing from the language of the visual arts to describe his literary techniques. He wrote in the preface to *Antonina* that he had arranged his material in such a way ‘that, in the painter’s phrase, the

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<sup>41</sup> Smith wrote in his unpublished memoir that

My introduction to Wilkie Collins came through Mr. Ruskin in the year [*blank in MS*]. Ruskin, I think, must have known Wilkie Collins’ father, the famous artist. He brought me one day the MS. of a novel with a classical subject Wilkie Collins had written. It was entitled “Antonina”, and he wished to know whether I would publish it. A “classical” subject, however, was not tempting and I declined the proposal (George Murray Smith, ‘The Recollections of a Long and Busy Life’, vol. II, ch. XVI, p. 6 (National Library of Scotland, MS 23192, folio 7)).

<sup>42</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to R. H. Dana, 12 January 1849: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 53-55 (pp. 53-54).

<sup>43</sup> See Wilkie Collins, letter to Richard Bentley, 28 November 1851: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, pp. 72-73 (p. 73), quoted in chapter 2 above.

<sup>44</sup> This was a theme to which Collins was to return almost a quarter of a century later in the short ‘Note to the Reader’ that prefaces *The Law and the Lady* (1875), in which he requests the reader ‘to bear in mind certain established truths, which occasionally escape your memory when you are reading a work of fiction’; the third such truth is that ‘Characters which may not have appeared, and Events which may not have taken place, within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters and perfectly probable Events, for all that’ (Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 3).

“effects” might thus be best “massed,” and the “lights and shadows” most harmoniously “balanced” and “discriminated”,<sup>45</sup> and it has already been seen that he claimed in the Letter of Dedication to *Basil* to have ‘resolved (in the painter’s phrase) to “work from the living model,” not only in drawing my characters, but in constructing my plot as well’.

Contemporary critics of fiction were equally ready to appropriate the vocabulary of painting; indeed, it was a critical commonplace that the same aesthetic principles applied to the two forms of art alike. The reviewer of *Basil* in *The Westminster Review*, who considered that Collins, having chosen a subject ‘which could neither please nor elevate, has [...] increased the displeasure it excites, by his resolution to spare us no revolting details’, explicitly equated them:

It matters not much whether the artist hold the pencil or the pen, the same great rules apply to both. He may simply copy nature as he sees it, and then the spectator has a pleasure proportioned to the beauty of the scene copied. He may give a noble spirit-stirring scene, and he will raise high thoughts and great aspirations in those who contemplate it. He may take a higher moral ground, and move to compassion by showing undeserved suffering, or like Hogarth, read a lesson to the idle and the dissipated. He may also paint scenes of cruelty and sensuality so gross that his picture will be turned to the wall by those who do not choose to have their imagination defiled.<sup>46</sup>

More complimentary reviewers also used a critical vocabulary better suited to painting than to fiction, as when they praised Collins’s ‘bold delineation of character, [...] each figure standing out from the canvass with the clear impress of individual character, and in subordination to, and in harmony with, the rest’,<sup>47</sup> or his ‘finished character-painting’, citing the ‘sketch’ of Basil’s father as an example of ‘how delicately Mr Collins paints’.<sup>48</sup> But Tim Dolin goes too far in suggesting that Collins had to invoke the visual arts in the Letter of Dedication because ‘there was no authoritative aesthetics of fiction to which he could

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<sup>45</sup> Collins, *Antonina*, vol. I, p. xii.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The Progress of Fiction as an Art’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 60, no. 118 (October 1853), pp. 342-74; *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>47</sup> ‘*Basil: A Story of Modern Life*’, *The Morning Post*, no. 24641 (December 13 1852), p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> ‘*Basil: A Story of Modern Life*’, *The Examiner*, no. 2339 (November 27 1852), pp. 756-57 (p. 757).

appeal'. He overlooks the fact that one critic in particular, George Henry Lewes, had 'developed a coherent aesthetic of the novel at a time when English literary critics paid little attention to the novel as a literary form'.<sup>49</sup> Collins knew of Lewes's aesthetic of fiction at first hand: Lewes expounded it in his regular reviews in *The Leader*, with which Collins had been closely associated for a period of some 16 months by the time he came to write the Letter of Dedication to *Basil*.

*The Leader*, whose first issue appeared on 30 March 1850, was a weekly newspaper whose prospectus announced that it stood for such radical doctrines as universal suffrage, secular education, social and labour reform, and freedom of religion.<sup>50</sup> It was founded by Lewes and Thornton Leigh Hunt: Hunt was the editor, responsible for the political content, and Lewes the literary editor, in which capacity he wrote a column titled 'Literature', many of the book reviews, and, under the pseudonym 'Vivian', a drama column. (The general manager of the paper was the socialist and secularist George Jacob Holyoake; given that Collins became associated with *The Leader* at about the time he began to write *Basil*, it seems likely that the name of Holyoake Square – tellingly spelt 'Holyoake' throughout volume 1 of the manuscript text, becoming 'Hollyoake' only in volume 2<sup>51</sup> – was a private joke on his part.) The spring and summer of 1851 saw financial difficulties and consequential upheavals in the ownership of *The Leader*,<sup>52</sup> which was eventually acquired by Edward Frederick Smyth Pigott, characterised by Thomas Carlyle as 'a young man of cash and ambition';<sup>53</sup> Pigott

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<sup>49</sup> Morris Greenhut, 'G. H. Lewes as a Critic of the Novel', *Studies in Philology*, vol. 45, no. 3 (July 1948), pp. 491-511 (p. 491).

<sup>50</sup> See 'Prospectus of *The Leader*', *The Leader*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 30 1850), p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, British Library, Add. MS 41060, folios 12<sup>r</sup> and 45<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> See *The London Gazette*, no. 21217 (June 10 1851), p. 1529, recording the retirement from the partnership of nine of the fourteen shareholders – including Lewes and Hunt – on 24 March 1851, and no. 21236 (August 15 1851), p. 2115, recording the retirement of a further two of the remaining shareholders on 25 June 1851.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Carlyle, letter to Joseph Neuberger, 2 February 1852: *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Charles Richard Sanders and Ian Campbell (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press,

formally appointed himself chief editor in place of Thornton Hunt in January 1852,<sup>54</sup> although it is clear from Wilkie Collins's correspondence with him that he had already been acting in that capacity for at least two months.<sup>55</sup> Pigott was an intimate friend of Collins – they had met as students at Lincoln's Inn, to which Pigott was admitted on 4 November 1845 and Collins on 17 May 1846,<sup>56</sup> and were called to the Bar on the same day, 21 November 1851<sup>57</sup> – and 'When Pigott purchased *The Leader*, Collins came with him';<sup>58</sup> it is most unlikely to be a coincidence that Collins's first identifiable contribution to *The Leader*, published on 19 July 1851 as was seen in chapter 1 above, appeared in the same issue as what seems to be Pigott's first contribution.<sup>59</sup> Collins must have met Lewes at about that time, and although the evidence does not suggest that they were ever intimate, it seems clear that they

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1970- ), vol. 27 (ed. Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, Hilary J. Smith) (1999), pp. 25-28 (p. 25). It is not now possible to establish precisely when Pigott began 'throwing his capital into the Leader abyss', in the words of George Eliot (as she was not yet known) (Marian Evans, letter to Mr and Mrs Charles Bray, 4 December 1852: *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (9 vols) (London: Oxford University Press, 1954-78), vol. 2 (1954), pp. 69-71 (p. 70)), although it was almost certainly somewhat earlier than 'late in 1851' as is suggested by the historian of the paper (Allan R. Brick, 'The *Leader*: Organ of Radicalism', PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1957, p. 205). In the spring of 1852 Pigott's solicitor wrote to Holyoake to ask him to forward the certificates for the shares formerly owned by William Linton, '[a]s I cannot complete the transfer of The Leader Newspaper to Mr Pigott without these' (E. Benham, letter to G. J. Holyoake, 17 May 1852: National Co-operative Archive, George Jacob Holyoake papers, no. 498). Linton was one of the shareholders who retired on 24 March 1851, which suggests that Pigott may have become interested in the paper then; he probably acquired his controlling interest at the time of the further change of shareholders in June 1851. That accords with the recollection of Herbert Spencer that Pigott was 'interested in *The Leader* as one who subscribed part of the capital' by the early summer of 1851, when Lewes brought Pigott to join Spencer and himself on a long Sunday walk (Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography* (2 vols) (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), vol. I, p. 436).

<sup>54</sup> See 'Address', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 95 (January 17 1852), p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> See Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 20 November 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 51 ('I have just received and read the proof of my article. It strikes me that where the writing flags is near the end – I'll put "spunk" into it there; and we'll test the quality of it together, before going to Press'); Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 22 November 1851: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, p. 76 ('Look over the proof and see whether it will do for Press now'); Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 22 December 1851: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 55 ('I would do the article for the Leader with pleasure – but the doctor forbids me to use my brains just yet; and I feel the doctor is right').

<sup>56</sup> See *The Records of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, vol. II: Admissions from A.D. 1800 to A.D. 1893 and Chapel Registers* (London: Lincoln's Inn, 1896), pp. 223; 227.

<sup>57</sup> See Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 22 November 1851: *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, vol. 1, p. 76 ('What a night! What speeches! What songs! I carried away much clarets and am rather a seedy barrister this morning. I think it must have been the oaths that disagreed with me').

<sup>58</sup> Beetz, 'Wilkie Collins and *The Leader*', p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Le Chat-huant (Edward Smyth Pigott), 'Vivian Ægrotat', *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 69 (July 19 1851), pp. 684-85.

became friends as well as colleagues: Lewes spoke of Collins as a friend in his review of *Basil* in November 1852,<sup>60</sup> and Collins asked Pigott to ‘Give my best regards to Lewes’ when writing from Italy in the autumn of 1853.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, that Collins read what Lewes wrote is demonstrated by the fact that when Collins wrote ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home’, the series of accounts of mesmeric seances published in *The Leader* in early 1852, they took the form of letters addressed to Lewes, who had, as he said in his response to the letters by ‘my friend C.’, ‘already, on several occasions, expressed my opinions in this journal on mesmerism’.<sup>62</sup> (The two men remained on good terms in later years: Collins is known to have dined with Lewes and George Eliot on a number of occasions between 1858 and 1861,<sup>63</sup> and when in 1868 Collins asked Lewes, who had published *The Physiology of Common Life* in 1859, ‘to help me with your knowledge to plane away a certain physiological knot which threatens to start up in the texture of my new story [*The Moonstone*]’, he described himself as ‘your old friend’.)<sup>64</sup>

Lewes’s aesthetic of fiction is shortly summarised: it is, as he wrote in *The Leader*, that a novel should be rooted in the author’s actual experience, ‘that experience which Art demands for its representation of Life’,<sup>65</sup> because ‘nothing but what we have actually experienced can

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<sup>60</sup> See [George Henry Lewes], ‘Basil’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 140 (November 27 1852), pp. 1141-42 (p. 1141).

<sup>61</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to Edward Pigott, 4 November 1853: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 91-94 (p. 94).

<sup>62</sup> G. H. Lewes, ‘The Fallacy of Clairvoyance’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 105 (March 27 1852), p. 305.

<sup>63</sup> See George Eliot’s journal, November 10 1858: *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross (3 vols) (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), vol. II, p. 65 (‘Wilkie Collins and Mr Pigott came to dine with us after a walk by the river’); Marian Lewes, letter to Charles Lee Lewes, 7 October 1859: *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 3 (1954), pp. 176-78 (p. 177) (‘The other evening Mr. Pigott who you remember, Mr. Redford, another friend of your father’s, and Mr. Wilkie Collins dined with us, and we had a charming musical evening’); George Henry Lewes, letter to Edward F. S. Pigott, 26 January 1860: *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 8 (1978), p. 258 (‘Fred Chapman (of Chapman and Hall) is coming to dine here on Saturday and I have asked Wilkie. Will you [...] join them? Music of course’); George Eliot’s journal, November 30 1861: *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, vol. II, p. 321 (‘In the evening we had Wilkie Collins, Mr Pigott, and Mr Spencer, and talked without any music’).

<sup>64</sup> Wilkie Collins, letter to George Henry Lewes, 20 April 1868: *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, vol. 2, p. 112.

<sup>65</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Clare Abbey’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 68 (July 12 1851), p. 660.

become permanent material in literature'.<sup>66</sup> It is an aesthetic that can aptly be described as an aesthetic of 'reality'. The term underlay his acclaim for *Jane Eyre* in 1847 ('Reality—deep, significant reality—is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography,—not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience'),<sup>67</sup> and it appeared again in 'The Lady Novelists', an article in *The Westminster Review* written at much the same time as the reviews in *The Leader* discussed below, where Lewes characterised literature as 'essentially the expression of experience and emotion—of what we have seen, felt, and thought': '[W]riters are bound to express what they have really known, felt, and suffered', 'to use actual experience as [their] material' and 'not quit their own point of view for the point of view of others', and it follows that 'only that literature is effective, and to be prized accordingly, which has *reality for its basis* [...] and *effective in proportion to the depth and breadth of that basis*'. By that standard, Jane Austen was 'the greatest artist that has ever written': 'Of all imaginative writers she is the most *real*. Never does she transcend her own actual experience, never does her pen trace a line that does not touch the experience of others. Herein we recognise the first quality of literature.'<sup>68</sup> Most pertinent for present purposes are Lewes's repeated statements of his aesthetic in reviews of novels in *The Leader* between mid-1851, when Wilkie Collins first became associated with the paper, and early November 1852, when he wrote the Letter of Dedication to *Basil*. Any number of those reviews might be cited in evidence.<sup>69</sup> Lewes wrote of *Clare Abbey; or, the Trials of Youth*

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<sup>66</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Hawthorne's New Romance', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 120 (July 10 1852), pp. 663-64 (p. 663).

<sup>67</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Recent Novels: French and English', *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 26, no. 216 (December 1847), pp. 686-95, reprinted in *Versatile Victorian: Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992) (p. 83); see also [George Henry Lewes], 'Currer Bell's *Shirley*', *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 91, no. 183 (January 1850), pp. 153-73 (p. 158) ('The grand secret of [*Jane Eyre*'s] success [...],—as of all genuine and lasting success,—was its *reality*. From out the depths of a sorrowing experience, here was a voice speaking to the experience of thousands').

<sup>68</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'The Lady Novelists', *The Westminster Review*, vol. 58, no. 113 (July 1852), pp. 129-41 (pp. 130-32; 134-35).

<sup>69</sup> What is said to be a bibliography of 'almost all of Lewes's known writings, books, and articles' can be found

(1851):

What was it forced the author into writing this book? It was not “hunger,” or the feat might be excused; if it was “request of friends,” we trust, that when that request is made again, it will not be granted until after a plain self-interrogation of this kind:— “Have I, clever writer that I am, any new story to tell? or any old one with new incidents or new characters such as I have known? or have I experienced anything in my own life which I have not yet given shape to, but which, if truthfully fashioned, would appeal, as all experience does, to the universal heart? or have I known strange out-of-the-way people in strange out-of-the-way scenes?”

Having answered any of these queries affirmatively, it becomes lawful to grant the request of friends. Otherwise it is not lawful.<sup>70</sup>

He made the same point with regard to *Percy Hamilton: or, The Adventures of a Westminster Boy* by Lord William Lennox (1851):

Lord William Lennox has less of the necessary craft than his two fair rivals on our list [...] but he has an immense advantage, viz., substantial reality. You feel throughout that he is dealing with actual experience. The Westminster Boy is taken from the ranks of Westminster School, not from the circulating library. The *substance* of the book is autobiographical no less than its form. [...] What we especially call attention to is the fact, that Lord William owes his success to the simple but rare process of giving *actual experience*, in lieu of borrowing from the lumber of three-volume commonplace.<sup>71</sup>

Of *Marian Withers* by Geraldine E. Jewsbury (1851) Lewes said that ‘As a picture it has many merits: first and foremost that of presenting the *realities*, not ideas and lay figures’,<sup>72</sup> and he returned to the theme just four weeks later:

There is one sense [...] in which we would gladly undertake to read all novels, viz., if the adjective *new* be confined to the novel, and not simply to the name; in other words, if the novel be something more than a dexterous rearrangement of old characters, old incidents, old remarks, and old language. Let the writer but tell us what he has actually seen and suffered, and we are but too happy to read him. Does this

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in Alice R. Kaminsky, *George Henry Lewes as Literary Critic* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), pp. 195-207. However, Kaminsky does not itemise all Lewes’s contributions to certain periodicals, including *The Leader*. As regards *The Leader*, she states that ‘Lewes’ personal file of his contributions to the *Leader* from March 30, 1850 to April 8, 1854 is at the Yale University Library’ (p. 201). That is not entirely accurate, however: the volume in question, held in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale (BEIN Ip L582 +C850), includes only Lewes’s contributions between 30 March 1850 and 19 July 1851 and between 1 January 1853 and 8 April 1854. The attribution to Lewes of articles published between 26 July 1851 and 25 December 1852 (the period with which this chapter is principally concerned), therefore, has to be based on style and content.

<sup>70</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Clare Abbey’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 68 (July 12 1851), p. 660.

<sup>71</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Recent Novels’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 70 (July 26 1851), p. 707.

<sup>72</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Marian Withers’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 75 (August 30 1851), pp. 825-26 (p. 825).

seem exacting too much? It is the rarest of fulfilled conditions!<sup>73</sup>

Mrs Burbury's *Florence Sackville, or Self-Dependence: An Autobiography* (1851) displays nowhere 'that urgent desire for reality, which is the soul of genius',<sup>74</sup> and much the same is true of *Clara Harrington. A Domestic Tale* (1851):

[This] novel gives remarkable promise; but, as we often say in these columns, guineas are not to be coined without gold, books are not to be written without experience of life. To set forth in plastic creations that which we ourselves have seen, thought, felt, and suffered, is the *only* legitimate object of writing. If we have nothing to say, let us reread the old novels and be silent!

As it is, the incidents of the story 'belong to the region of Romance in three vols., not the Romance of Reality'.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, *The Head of the Family* (1852), than which 'no novel published since *Jane Eyre* has taken such a hold of us', is 'written with eloquence and power. The authoress has seen, thought, suffered; her work betrays it',<sup>76</sup> while *The Two Families: An Episode in the History of Chapelton* (1852) contains

more than one example of an adherence to truth of nature—in defiance of the truth as it has been understood immemorially in Circulating Libraries—which argues in the writer the possession of the rarest power; and by this adherence to truth, the story—in itself improbable as most fictions—has the lifelike aspect of actual experience.<sup>77</sup>

*Memoirs and Resolutions of Adam Græme of Mossgray, including some Chronicles of the Borough of Fendie* (1852), on the other hand, has '[n]either in the substance nor the form [...] the first conditions of art':

To write a novel is something more than to fill three volumes. The author has this obligation imposed, that he must either embody in fiction some actual experience of life, or must have an interesting story to tell. Wherefore pile Pelion on Ossa in Great Marlborough-street, when both Pelion and Ossa are of the common stones with which we macadamize our roads? Wherefore this incessant winnowing of the old chaff? Wherefore three volumes that are not *new*? If any writer has seen, or thought, or suffered—if life, in any of its myriad aspects, has to him presented a new revelation

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<sup>73</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Lady Selina Clifford', *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 79 (September 27 1851), pp. 924-25 (p. 924).

<sup>74</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Florence Sackville', *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 90 (December 13 1851), p. 1187.

<sup>75</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Clara Harrington', *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 91 (December 20 1851), pp. 1212-13.

<sup>76</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'The Head of the Family', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 93 (January 3 1852), pp. 16-17 (p. 16).

<sup>77</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'New Novels', *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 97 (January 31 1852), p. 108.

[...], by all means let us have it; and let us have it *as he sees it*, not as it has been seen for years in Great Marlborough-street. If not, then let him be silent.<sup>78</sup>

In the same vein, Lewes said to the author of *The Melvilles* (1852) that ‘there can be no doubt of your faculties, but guineas are only coined from gold, and if, instead of golden experience, you attempt to use the materials of circulating libraries, all the faculty in the world will not do.’<sup>79</sup> In Emilie Carlen’s *Woman’s Life; or, the Trials of Caprice* (1852) he missed ‘the evidence of that impassioned experience which alone can provide permanent material for fiction’,<sup>80</sup> while both *Constance Tyrrell; or, the Half-Sister* by P. H. Pepys (1852) and *The Heir of Sherborne; or, The Attainder* (1852) ‘possess the incurable sin of not being real; they are like no life but that which moves through three volumes or five acts—the library and the stage’.<sup>81</sup> Lewes made his point particularly forcefully in a review of the provocatively titled *Realities, A Tale* by E. Lynn (1851):

To the uninitiated it seems so easy to be natural, and to describe realities! Yet so difficult is it that not one in a thousand can write *as he thinks*, but each writes more or less according to a pattern; that is to say, *not* as he thinks, but as he thinks he *ought* to write! If this be true of the mere diction, it is glaringly so of the modes of representation. Difficult as it is to write the phrases you think, it is still more difficult to describe truly what you see, or to represent what you imagine. In fact the difficulty is only to be overcome by Genius. As authors in general do not write according to the idiom of their own minds, but according to the idiom of the literature of the day, gathering together all the current phrases, worn images, and familiar turns which belong to no one writer but have become common property [...]—so likewise in describing or in representing they follow conventions, and sacrifice individual truth to the so-called poetical effect. The first test we should apply to a young writer, in a consultation as to whether he had genuine artistic power, would not be whether his style were harmonious, his images captivating, or his command of language remarkable; we should set him to describe the brick wall opposite! Ten to one he would fail miserably. Twenty to one he would exaggerate!<sup>82</sup>

As he said a few years later of John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters IV* (1856), the canon laid

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<sup>78</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Adam Græme of Mossgray’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 108 (April 17 1852), p. 375.

<sup>79</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘The Melvilles’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 111 (May 8 1852), p. 447.

<sup>80</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Woman’s Life’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 122 (July 24 1852), p. 711.

<sup>81</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Novels for Novel Readers’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 129 (September 11 1852), pp. 879-80 (p. 879).

<sup>82</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Realities’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 62 (May 31 1851), pp. 517-18 (p. 517).

down by Ruskin that “‘It is always wrong to draw what you don’t see,” [...] is a canon as applicable to the poet (and novelist) as to the painter; and one, indeed, which has been iterated in these columns with almost wearisome pertinacity’.<sup>83</sup>

It is not only the incidents of fiction that must be ‘real’ or ‘truthful’; Lewes made clear that novelists must also aim to make their characters real, recognisable as individuals who belong to the actuality of everyday life rather than the artificial world of the novel. It was a point he emphasised over and over again:

[O]ur readers know the constant objection we have to raise against the novelists in their delineation of character [...]. Writers recklessly pillage the circulating library for characters [...], then “wonder” at us if we yawn over the *crambe recoccta*. They start with a dim unconscious theory that Life is somewhat as represented on the Stage and in Three Volumes, and drawing from the models found there, assure you they have “copied from life.”<sup>84</sup>

In ‘the vast majority of novels’, ‘characters are mere masks borrowed from the nearest Nathan’.<sup>85</sup> Those in *The Melvilles* ‘are faint, lacking the strong lines of individuality, looking like what they are—persons in a novel’;<sup>86</sup> those in *Castle Deloraine; or, The Ruined Peer* by Maria Priscilla Smith (1851) ‘have no existence—not even a fantastic life. They belong to the old repertory of *characteristics*, and have no new features whereby we can for a moment believe in them’,<sup>87</sup> while the characters of *Florence Sackville* are all ‘familiar to us—some of them obviously taken from life, but taken *from* life to be rouged, wigged, spangled, and set before the footlights that their reality may be lost in “effect.”’<sup>88</sup> In this regard too Jane Austen, ‘incomparable as an artist’, was for Lewes the great exemplar: ‘She makes her people speak and act as they speak and act in every day life; and she is the only artist who has done

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<sup>83</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Imaginative Artists’, *The Leader*, vol. 7, no. 324 (June 7 1856), pp. 545-46 (p. 545).

<sup>84</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Mrs. Norton’s Novel’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 60 (May 17 1851), p. 466.

<sup>85</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘The Daughter of Night’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 45 (February 1 1851), p. 108.

<sup>86</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘The Melvilles’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 111 (May 8 1852), p. 447.

<sup>87</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Recent Novels’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 70 (July 26 1851), p. 707.

<sup>88</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Florence Sackville’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 90 (December 13 1851), p. 1187.

this with success and pleasant effect.<sup>89</sup> Other authors also came up to his requirement for realistic characterisation. Although the incidents of *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet. An Autobiography* (1850) are no more lifelike than the style – ‘they are thrown in for some purpose of the author’s, without much reference to verisimilitude’ – the character of the bookseller Sandy Mackay (considered by contemporary critics to have been modelled on Thomas Carlyle)<sup>90</sup> is ‘so *true* in his individuality that we ransack our memory to discover whom it is we have known that might have sat for the portrait’.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Thackeray’s Blanche Amory and Becky Sharpe are ‘so marvellously true to nature, so minutely and profoundly true, that we who know one who might have sat for the portraits (but did not) are puzzled to say which of the two is most like her’.<sup>92</sup>

Lewes’s concern in *The Leader*, then, was to preach against the all too frequent substitution in contemporary fiction of the tropes of the circulating library for the truths of actual experience. As he wrote in a review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Casa Guidi Windows. A Poem* (1851), ‘at the root of all aesthetics’ lies ‘[t]he difference between feigning and creating—between imagining scenes and language for things which *others* have experienced, and of taking from the world of *our* experience things which Art raises into its own world of plastic beauty’.<sup>93</sup> But it would be wrong to conclude that Lewes advocated that a novel should comprise no more than a transcript of experience; to do so would be to overlook the

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<sup>89</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘The Fair Carew’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 87 (November 22 1851), p. 1115.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, ‘*Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet. An Autobiography*. [Second Notice]’, *The Nonconformist*, vol. 10 – New Series, no. 254 (September 25 1850), pp. 783-84 (p. 783) (‘The character of Sandy Mackaye [*sic*] is admirably drawn [...]. In spite of the disguise, no one can miss the likeness—evidently intended by the author—to Thomas Carlyle’); George Gilfillan, ‘D. M. Moir. (Δ)’, *Hogg’s Instructor*, vol. 7 – New Series (1851), pp. 145-47 (p. 147) (‘Sandy Mackay [...] is just Thomas Carlyle *humanised*’).

<sup>91</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Alton Locke: A Chartist Novel’, *The Leader*, vol. 1, no. 23 (August 31 1850), pp. 544-45 (p. 544).

<sup>92</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Pendennis’, *The Leader*, vol. 1, no. 39 (December 21 1850), pp. 929-30: *Versatile Victorian: Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*, p. 115.

<sup>93</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Mrs. Browning’s New Poem’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 64 (June 14 1851), p. 560-61 (p. 560).

full extent of ‘the difference between feigning and creating’. To create is not merely to record ‘the world of our experience’, but to take from it ‘things which Art raises into its own world of plastic beauty’. It was a fundamental tenet of Lewes’s aesthetic theory, stated time and again throughout his writing career, that art is neither a mere facsimile of reality nor the product of the artist’s imagination alone. Rather, art is a representation of reality transformed by the genius of the artist – a representation that, like the work of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, gives ‘imaginative expression to actual experience’.<sup>94</sup> Lewes first expressed his conception of the relationship between what he later came to call the real and the ideal in a novel of his own, *Ranthorpe* (of which Wilkie Collins owned a copy),<sup>95</sup> published in 1847 but written, according to the preface, ‘five years ago’:

Only so much as the mind knows can the eye see; only so much as the mind perceives in any object, can it attempt to represent. Some painters talk fatiguingly of the “imitation of nature;” whereas art is not a daguerreotype, but the representation of what the mind sees in nature. It is in proportion to the faculty of poetic vision, that a Claude transcends a mere *tableau de genre*. As an *imitation* of nature in the literal sense, all landscapes are bungles; in the poetical sense there is no question about imitation, but about reproduction. [...]

There is a sentiment in every picture, however rude, that comes from the hand of a true artist. A cottage, with the smoke curling from its small chimney, losing itself in a clear atmosphere, may be either very poetical or very commonplace, according to the mind of the painter. All the correctness of tone, colouring, and perspective in the world, are nothing, unless the poet’s magic give the whole that grace, impossible to be defined, but by all distinctly felt. The difference between an imitation of nature, and an artistic conception of nature, may be stated by two examples: Denner and Raphael. Denner copied every hair and freckle; looking at the human face with a microscope, he anticipated the effects of the daguerreotype: his works are glorious specimens of *industry*, while those of Raphael are the most glorious specimens of *art*, and are truly “joys for ever.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘The Lady Novelists’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 58, no. 113 (July 1852), pp. 129-41 (p. 138).

<sup>95</sup> See William Baker, *Wilkie Collins’s Library: A Reconstruction* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 128, no. 313.

<sup>96</sup> [George Henry Lewes], *Ranthorpe* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1847), pp. v; 186. It is striking that both of Lewes’s novels were criticised by contemporary reviewers for failing to meet the criteria for fiction with which he expected other authors to comply. *Ranthorpe* was described in terms that would be echoed in Lewes’s reviews in *The Leader* as ‘the work of a man [...] whose knowledge of life is obviously derived less from actual experience than from conversation and books’ (‘Literature’, *The Observer*, May 30 1847, p. 6), while *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848) was said to lack the imaginative power necessary to transform reality into art:

Thereafter, the subject recurs in his criticism. In 1849 Lewes wrote in an article on Shakespeare that ‘All poetry [is] a departure from nature—otherwise it would be nature and not art’:

Critics have been too apt to talk about nature and the natural, as if the object of art were to produce an illusion; as if correct imitation of nature were the first object of art. But this is a most mischievous mistake. [...] The most exquisite works of art necessarily depart from the truth, to produce their highest effects. [...] No one’s sense of reality is shocked by observing that a marble statue has not the hues, the action, and the warmth of a human being. It does not profess to be an *imitation*; it professes to be a *representation*, in hard, cold, and colourless marble, of a human form. Paint it,—and [...] you quit the professed sphere of art, that is, representation,—to intrude on that of reality, that is, imitation[.]<sup>97</sup>

and he used the same example in an article in *The Leader* about William Macready’s farewell to the stage in 1851:

It is a question often mooted in private, whether Macready was a *great* actor, or only an intelligent actor, or (for this, too, is not unfrequently said) an intrinsically bad actor. The last opinion is uttered by [...] those critics who, looking at the drama as an *imitation of Nature*, dwell upon the exaggerations and other false colours wherewith Macready paints, and proclaim him, consequently, a bad artist. [...]

I am impressed with the conviction that the majority mistakes Art for an *imitation* of Nature. It is no such thing. Art is a *Representation*. This is why too close an approach to Reality in Art is shocking: why coloured statues are less agreeable—except to the

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It is possible that some persons and circumstances in *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*, may be natural in the sense of having actually existed: the same seems to be the case with occasional traits of character since they have no purpose beyond the author’s idea of their “naturalness”; Mr. Lewes himself intimates that some of his sketches of society have their actual prototypes. This notion of nature is a common misconception. In the first place, it does not follow that a thing which is natural in the reality is equally natural in the copy; a thing and its representation are by no means identical. But mere natural existence is not nature in the sense of art; which requires a largeness and an elevation rarely found in particular events or particular persons. In point of fact, however, the natural in life is never exactly copied; something is added, something is omitted, and possibly the circumstances are altogether altered. [...] The artist, whether he works on the external form or on “the manners and the mind,” derives his ideas and his materials from nature, but he does not take a bit here and a bit there, and put them together with a kind of laboured dexterity. He fuses them in his own mind, and reproduces them as a complete and consistent whole; consistent not merely as regards one part with another, but as respects structure, treatment, style, and tone, which all harmonize with the subject and its materials. This power is called by various names—genius, imagination, art: and in this creative and vivifying power Mr. Lewes is deficient

(‘Rose, Blanche, and Violet’, *The Spectator*, vol. 21, no. 1038 (May 20 1848), pp. 493-94 (p. 493)). Lewes himself later acknowledged, with characteristic critical acumen, that he had ‘so long seen that Fiction is not my Forte’ (George Henry Lewes, letter to William Blackwood, 17 July 1878: *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 7 (1956), pp. 43-44 (p. 43)).

<sup>97</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Shakspeare’s Critics: English and Foreign’, *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 90, no. 181 (July 1849), pp. 39-77 (pp. 54-55).

vulgarest minds—than the colourless marble.<sup>98</sup>

But if art is not mere imitation, it is not mere invention either. When *The Leader* had been in existence for only a few months, Lewes wrote in its columns that ‘We have so often insisted on the idleness of men’s “snatching their subjects out of the air,” instead of re-shaping their experience in forms of beauty, that we need not again recur to it’.<sup>99</sup> He returned to the issue towards the end of that year: *The Poems Posthumous and Collected of Thomas Lovell Beddoes* (1851) shows that the author lacks the ‘rare power’ of ‘representing Life’, that he ‘never pays Nature the compliment of attempting to copy her. In the alembic of his wild imagination, Nature becomes transmuted into Phantasms’.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, *The Poetical Works of John Edmund Reade* (1852) shows its author

everywhere [...] substituting vague abstractions for the quick pulsations of life—a sounding period for a reality. He calls these volumes the

“Inward confessional of all that passed  
Upon this inner soul. [...]”

Now, it is precisely because these volumes are *no* confession of his life, that we deny their claim to be considered poetry.<sup>101</sup>

It was a failing found in all too many poets, as Lewes noted later in 1852, this time in *The Westminster Review*:

Commonly we hear the single faculty of Imagination set up as the distinguishing superiority of a poet [...]. Imagination, be it never so daringly active, will produce no good poetry if [...] deprived of the requisite materials which are to become plastic in its hands.<sup>102</sup>

Lewes continued to emphasise that true art does not consist in imitation only or in imagination only, but is rather a true artist’s representation of reality, in the years after Wilkie

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<sup>98</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Was Macready a Great Actor?’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 46 (February 8 1851), pp. 132-33; *Versatile Victorian: Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*, p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Bennett’s Poems’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 41 (January 4 1851), pp. 16-17 (p. 16).

<sup>100</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Poems by Beddoes’, *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 84 (November 1 1851), p. 1045.

<sup>101</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Reade’s Poetical Works’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 97 (January 31 1852), pp. 110-11 (p. 110).

<sup>102</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Shelley and the Letters of Poets’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 57, no. 112 (April 1852), pp. 502-11 (p. 510).

Collins wrote the Letter of Dedication to *Basil*. In 1854 he said in *The Leader* that

[A]lthough it is indisputable that the creative “shaping” faculty of Imagination is the necessary complement and crown to all the poet’s faculties, it is also true that the crown without the kingdom is but a glittering bauble. The poet is not great by the unrestricted activity of Imagination, but by the plastic power which shapes realities into forms of beauty[.]<sup>103</sup>

and he came back to the topic more than once after he ceased writing for *The Leader* in the mid-1850s. In 1858, for example, he wrote in one of his best-known essays of ‘that legitimate style of idealization which consists in presenting the highest form of reality’, arguing that

A distinction is drawn between Art and Reality, and an antithesis established between Realism and Idealism which would never have gained acceptance had not men in general lost sight of the fact that Art is a Representation of Reality—a Representation which, inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium [...]; but while thus limited, while thus regulated by the necessities imposed on it by each medium of expression, Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*.

Echoing what he had written in *Ranthorpe* in the early 1840s, he identified the ‘significance of the phrase Idealism in Art’ as being that the true artist, ‘[w]ithout [...] departing from reality’, throws a sentiment into his work ‘which every spectator will recognise as poetry’; the novelist ‘expresses his mind in his novels, and according as his emotional sympathy is keen and active, according to his poetic disposition, will the choice and treatment of his subject be poetical: but it must always be real—true’.<sup>104</sup> Lewes returned to the subject in 1865 in ‘The Principles of Success in Literature’, a series of articles in *The Fortnightly Review* in which he sought to set out his critical theories in detail, where he contended that ‘if a man pretends to represent an object, he pretends to represent it accurately: the only difference is what the poetical or prosaic mind sees in the object’:

A poetical mind sees noble and affecting suggestions in details which the prosaic mind will interpret prosaically. And the true meaning of Idealism is precisely this

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<sup>103</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘A Dream-Epic’, *The Leader*, vol. 5, no. 201 (January 28 1854), pp. 91-92 (p. 91).

<sup>104</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 70, no. 138 (October 1858), pp. 488-518 (pp. 493-95).

vision of realities in their highest and most affecting forms, not in the vision of something removed from or opposed to realities. Titian's grand picture of "Peter the Martyr" is, perhaps, as instructive an example as could be chosen of successful Idealism; because in it we have a marvellous presentation of reality as seen by a poetic mind. [...] [T]he triumph achieved by Titian is that the mind is filled with a vision of poetic beauty which is felt to be real.<sup>105</sup>

Nowhere did Lewes express his lifelong conception that the real and the ideal are connected and not distinct, that the ideal is the real transformed by the genius of the artist, more clearly than in the philosophical work to which he devoted the final years of his life:

The world represented in Philosophy may be likened to the life which is represented in the Drama. In a play we have no accurate reproduction of what does occur, or ever did occur, but a reflection of the elementary motives, incidents, passions, *under artistic conditions*. This last clause is emphasized, because it is the essential point, and is too often slurred over. It says that when the passions and events are reproduced by the dramatist, they are transformed into artistic passions and events; and the conditions of Art necessitate the omission of much that is real, because it is too unwieldy for expression, while much is also transposed and altered, because the reality would be unsuitable for the desired end. Thus all is selected and rearranged according to the internal conditions of theatric representation, and not according to the internal conditions of the life represented. Life is idealized. Nothing is really presented. A few yards of painted canvas stand for the illimitable sky and the far-stretching sea; the glittering goblets are not of gold; the wine quaffed from them is toast-and-water, or mere air; no blood flows from the fatal wounds; no tears wet the eyes of grief. And yet, although all this is thus unreal, the real world is represented; the facts of life are there, both the facts of common experience and the facts of imaginative experience. The idealism is founded on realism.<sup>106</sup>

For Lewes, then, the real and the ideal are not antithetical; rather, the ideal is a representation of the real subjected to 'the plastic power which shapes realities into forms of beauty'. It was surely this aesthetic of fiction as the imaginative re-shaping of actual experience, so frequently expounded in *The Leader* and elsewhere by the time Lewes's colleague Wilkie Collins came to contemplate the Letter of Dedication to *Basil* in the autumn of 1852, and not Ruskin's aesthetic of painting, with which Collins – avowedly rejecting 'the artifices of

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<sup>105</sup> Editor (George Henry Lewes), 'The Principles of Success in Literature. Chapter III. Of Vision in Art', *The Fortnightly Review*, vol. 1, no. 5 (July 15 1865), pp. 572-89; *Versatile Victorian: Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*, pp. 241-42.

<sup>106</sup> George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind. First Series: The Foundations of a Creed*, vol. II (London: Trübner and Co., 1875), pp. 132-33.

sentimental writing' (vol. I, p. xii) in favour of 'the reading of present realities in men', claiming to have 'resolved [...] to "work from the living model"' as regards both characters and plot, to have 'founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact in real life' and to have guided his narrative thereafter 'where I knew by my own experiences, and by the experiences incidentally related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true', confident that the more his work was rooted in the Actual, 'the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it' – was seeking to associate himself when he declared that it was his aspiration to write 'the noblest poetry of prose fiction[,] the poetry of every-day truth'. Lyn Pykett suggests that when Collins contended that 'an adherence to the "Actual" was the means to the "Ideal" which was the proper concern of art', he was '[a]nticipating the arguments of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes in the mid-1850s'.<sup>107</sup> Given that Lewes was making those arguments long before the mid-1850s, as has been seen, it must be more likely that Collins was echoing Lewes than that he was anticipating him; it must be equally likely that Nicholas Dames is mistaken when he says that Lewes's 'particular synthesis' of the real and the ideal 'was not taken up by any novelist or critic'.<sup>108</sup>

The argument made here, that Collins was identifying his novel with Lewes's aesthetic of fiction rather than with Ruskin's aesthetic of painting, leaves open the possibility that there is nonetheless an indirect relation between the Letter of Dedication and *Modern Painters*, on the ground that the linking of the real and the ideal in Lewes's aesthetic was itself influenced by Ruskin. But although his later criticism clearly reflects the influence of the final volumes of

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<sup>107</sup> Lyn Pykett, *Wilkie Collins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 102.

<sup>108</sup> Nicholas Dames, 'Realism and Theories of the Novel', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820-1880*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 289-305 (p. 304).

*Modern Painters* – a pervasive presence in ‘The Principles of Success in Literature’ – Lewes was less receptive of Ruskin’s doctrine at the time with which this chapter is concerned.

Writing in 1853, he memorably dismissed volume II of *The Stones of Venice*:

Ruskin is one of the most eloquent writers of our day; he loves Art with passionate devotion, and both feels and understands more on this great subject than any other critic; nevertheless every one who can resist the *entrainment* of his enthusiasm, and the imposing authority of his dogmatism, must regard him as a writer of charming paradox, always worth hearing—seldom worth following. He ill bears criticism. Those trenchant and iconoclastic assertions, those sweeping generalizations, those apparently wilful and capricious outbreaks which disfigure all his writings, reveal a mind essentially unfitted for the high ambitious task it has set before it—the task, namely, of indoctrinating Englishmen with a philosophy of Art. There is, also, an inordinate degree of coxcombry in his writing which renders it suspicious.<sup>109</sup>

Volume III fared little better (‘The charges of dogmatism and intolerance, of hasty generalization and arrogant self-assertion’ brought against Ruskin by his adversaries ‘cannot [...] lightly be set aside’),<sup>110</sup> and it was not until the publication in 1856 of *Modern Painters III* that Lewes’s attitude towards Ruskin began to change under the influence of George Eliot’s intense admiration for him:<sup>111</sup>

We have a kindness for Mr. Ruskin, derived entirely from the reading of his books. All men who think for themselves, or who have even wished to think for themselves on matters of Art and Literature, owe him a great debt of gratitude for valuable teaching and hearty encouragement. [...] Feeling this, we have no desire to dwell at length on, what we believe to be, the inherent defects of Mr. Ruskin’s mental nature. We can find enough that is good, true, and beautiful in all his books to atone for the blemishes which may deface them here and there—blemishes which we see with no unfriendly eye—and which we sincerely deplore as obstacles that hinder Mr. Ruskin sadly in his own earnest and noble purpose of following the truth himself, and of

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<sup>109</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Ruskin in Venice’, *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 182 (September 17 1853), pp. 905-907 (p. 905).

<sup>110</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Ruskin’s Last Volume’, *The Leader*, vol. 4, no. 186 (October 15 1853), pp. 1001-1002 (p. 1001).

<sup>111</sup> See Marian Lewes, letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 19 February 1856: *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 227-29 (p. 228) (‘We are delighting ourselves with Ruskin’s 3<sup>d</sup> volume, which contains some of the finest writing I have read for a long time (among recent books). I read it aloud for an hour or so after dinner’). The terms in which Eliot herself reviewed *Modern Painters III* are well known:

The truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is *realism*—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life

([Marian Lewes], ‘Art and Belles Lettres’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 65, no. 128 (April 1856), pp. 615-50, reprinted in *George Eliot, Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) (p. 248)).

teaching it honestly to the public.<sup>112</sup>

In the circumstances, it is more plausible that the aesthetic of fiction that Lewes advocated in the early 1850s was shaped, not by Ruskin, but by a critic whom he unequivocally admired, William Hazlitt, of whom he wrote as early as 1841 that ‘No man’s works are more thought-exciting—more full of suggestive matter, than his, and in criticism his superiority is recognized even by Quarterly Reviewers’.<sup>113</sup> It seems indubitable that Lewes was influenced by Hazlitt. Indeed, one instance of that influence has already been quoted. Lewes’s observation in *Ranthorpe* that ‘Denner copied every hair and freckle; looking at the human face with a microscope, he anticipated the effects of the daguerreotype: his works are glorious specimens of *industry*’ echoes Hazlitt’s ‘On Application to Study’, published in 1826: ‘Denner finished his unmeaning portraits with a microscope, and without ever being weary of his fruitless task; for the essence of his genius was industry’.<sup>114</sup> On occasion, influence strayed into direct plagiarism. Reviewing a reissue of Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the English Poets* in 1841, Lewes drew attention to the author’s ‘caustic wit’ in writing of George

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<sup>112</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Modern Painters’, *The Leader*, vol. 7, no. 309 (February 23 1856), pp. 183-84 (p. 183). Lewes maintained and even amplified that newly laudatory tone when *Modern Painters IV* was published later the same year:

Let R. A’s *in esse* and *in posse* squabble over Mr. Ruskin’s dicta, and triumph over his contradictions, real or seeming; we, the public, read him, and are both taught and delighted by him. In the merely argumentative parts we may think him sophistical or incomplete; in the individual criticisms, pronouncing absolute judgments on painters past and present, we may think him capricious, wilful, and utterly beside the truth; we may neither accept his dicta respecting Art, nor his verdicts on Artists, but we must all feel subdued by his eloquence, enlightened by his novel views, stimulated by his thoughts, instructed by his accurate observations of Nature, and thus close his columns with a sense of gratitude, and a conviction that he has taught us to look at pictures and at Nature with fresh insight. Such a writer is really a national possession ([George Henry Lewes], ‘Ruskin’s Modern Painters’, *The Leader*, vol. 7, no. 322 (May 24 1856), pp. 497-98); that first review was followed by two more in subsequent weeks ([George Henry Lewes], ‘Imaginative Artists’, *The Leader*, vol. 7, no. 324 (June 7 1856), pp. 545-46; [George Henry Lewes], ‘Precipices and Peasant Life’, *The Leader*, vol. 7, no. 325 (June 14 1856), p. 570).

<sup>113</sup> G[eorge] H[enry] L[ewes], ‘Lectures on the Comic Writers’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 35, no. 2 (April 1841), p. 503; see also [George Henry] L[ewes], ‘Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (September 1840), p. 494 (‘Hazlitt was one of the acutest thinkers and most agreeable writers of his day, and therefore one of the best critics’).

<sup>114</sup> [William Hazlitt], ‘Essay VI. On Application to Study’, *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things* (2 vols) (1826), vol. I, pp. 129-52, reprinted in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe after the edition of A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (21 vols) (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-34), vol. 12 (1931) (p. 56).

Crabbe that

“He describes the interior of a cottage like a *person sent to distrain for rent*. He has an eye to the number of arms in an old worm-eaten chair, and takes care to inform himself and the reader whether a joint-stool stands upon three legs or four [...]”—the wit ministering to the truth of the criticism.<sup>115</sup>

A couple of years later, Lewes appropriated Hazlitt’s wit to his own account, observing of

Balzac that

The minuteness and gusto with which he describes dress and furniture, are without parallel. He cannot mention a single room in the house, but he must instantly make an inventory of the furniture, as if with an eye to distraining for rent.<sup>116</sup>

Although they do not appear to have been remarked upon previously, it is not difficult to identify correspondences between Hazlitt’s writings on prose fiction – a ‘department of criticism’, to use his own phrase,<sup>117</sup> to which he has been said to be ‘the first major critic in England to give anything approaching adequate attention’<sup>118</sup> – and Lewes’s reviews in *The Leader* and elsewhere. When Lewes claims to prize only ‘that literature [...] which has *reality for its basis*’, it is not fanciful to hear an echo of Hazlitt’s view, expressed in a work that was reviewed by Lewes when it was reissued in 1841,<sup>119</sup> that the best writers of fiction – he names Cervantes, Le Sage, Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, and Sterne – ‘take their rank by the side of reality’, so that in their work we find ‘a close imitation of men and manners; we

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<sup>115</sup> G[eorge] H[enry] L[ewes], ‘Lectures on the English Poets’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (July 1841), pp. 262-63.

<sup>116</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Balzac and George Sand’, *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, vol. 33, no. 66 (April 1844), pp. 265-98 (p. 279).

<sup>117</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘Lecture VI. On the English Novelists’, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers. Delivered at the Surry Institution* (1819), pp. 208-65; *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 6 (1931), pp. 107-108.

<sup>118</sup> Charles I. Patterson, ‘William Hazlitt as a Critic of Prose Fiction’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 68, no. 5 (December 1953), pp. 1001-16 (p. 1016). John Kinnaird writes that Hazlitt’s criticism of prose fiction moves towards ‘an original conception of the novel’ as ‘a genre with its own laws of character development, and its own methods of representing “truth”’, for which he ‘has never been given sufficient credit’ (John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 253).

<sup>119</sup> See G[eorge] H[enry] L[ewes], ‘Lectures on the Comic Writers’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 35, no. 2 (April 1841), p. 503.

see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet with it in the world'. Such authors,

having no other object than to imitate nature, could only hope for success from the fidelity of their pictures; and were bound (in self-defence) to reduce the boasts of vague theorists and the exaggerations of angry disputants to the mortifying standard of reality.<sup>120</sup>

Among living novelists, although Hazlitt considered that Sir Walter Scott lacked the imaginative power that he – like Lewes – regarded as necessary to transform reality into the highest art ('whatever [Scott] accumulates or scatters through his pages, he leaves as he finds it, with very few marks of the master-mind upon it'),<sup>121</sup> he too

has found out (oh, rare discovery) that facts are better than fiction; that there is no romance like the romance of real life; and that if we can but arrive at what men feel, do, and say in striking and singular situations, the result will be 'more lively, audible, and full of vent,' than the fine-spun cobwebs of the brain.<sup>122</sup>

Again, Lewes's view that fictional characters should be drawn with 'the strong lines of individuality', should 'speak and act as they speak and act in every day life' rather than being 'mere masks borrowed from the nearest Nathan', reflects Hazlitt's. Hazlitt particularly praised the characterisation of Cervantes:

The leading characters in *Don Quixote* are strictly individuals; that is, they do not so much belong to, as form a class by themselves. In other words, the actions and manners of the chief *dramatis personæ* do not arise out of the actions and manners of those around them, or the situation of life in which they are placed, but out of the

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<sup>120</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the English Novelists': *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 6, pp. 106-107.

<sup>121</sup> [William Hazlitt], 'Essay XIV. On Dr. Spurzheim's Theory', *The Plain Speaker*, vol. I, pp. 331-74: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 12, p. 156; see also William Hazlitt, 'On the English Novelists': *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 6, p. 129 (Scott's 'characters are transplanted at once from their native soil to the page which we are reading, without any traces of their having passed through the hot-bed of the author's genius').

<sup>122</sup> [William Hazlitt], 'Sir Walter Scott', *The Spirit of the Age; or, Contemporary Portraits* (1825), pp. 131-56: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 11 (1932), p. 62. Although it seems unlikely that Lewes could have read it, the language of a later observation by Hazlitt is even closer to that used by Lewes to describe his aesthetic of fiction:

Fiction is not necessarily the mere production of fancy, although much fancy is to be found in works of fiction; nor is it essential that fiction should be untrue, for the materials of our best fictions are principally drawn from fact. It is not a stage illusion, nor a magic lantern, presenting shadows and spectacles that either burlesque or flatter humanity; but a transcript from nature, in which the truth is preserved not *literally* but *poetically*

([William Hazlitt], 'The Waverley Notes', *The Atlas*, vol. 4, no. 160 (June 7 1829), p. 8: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 20 (1934), p. 232).

peculiar dispositions of the persons themselves, operated on by certain impulses of caprice and accident. Yet these impulses are so true to nature, and their operation so exactly described, that we not only recognise the fidelity of the representation, but recognise it with all the advantages of novelty superadded. They are in the best sense *originals*, namely, in the sense in which nature has her originals.

In Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, on the other hand, 'There is little individual character'. The author 'does not take the elements of human nature, and work them up into new combinations (which is the excellence of Don Quixote)'; rather,

he takes off, as it were, the general, habitual impression which circumstances make on certain conditions of life, and moulds all his characters accordingly. All the persons whom he introduces, carry about with them the badge of their profession; and you see little more of them than their costume. He describes men as belonging to distinct classes in society; not as they are in themselves, or with the individual differences which are always to be discovered in nature. His hero, in particular, has no character but that of the successive circumstances in which he is placed. His priests are only described as priests: his valets, his players, his women, his courtiers and his sharpers, are all alike. Nothing can well exceed the monotony of the work in this respect [...].

As regards English fiction, the same distinction is drawn between Fielding and Smollett.

Fielding, whose realism Hazlitt greatly admired ('As a painter of real life, he was equal to Hogarth; as a mere observer of human nature, he was little inferior to Shakespeare'), 'has brought together a greater variety of characters in common life, marked with more distinct personalities, and without an atom of caricature, than any other novel writer whatever'.

Smollett, by contrast, is a 'lively caricaturist', lacking Fielding's 'superior insight into the springs of human character, and the constant development of that character through every change of circumstance':

Smollett's humour often arises from the situation of the persons, or the peculiarity of their external appearance [...]. The incidents frequently resemble detached anecdotes taken from a newspaper or magazine; and, like those in *Gil Blas*, might happen to a hundred other characters. He exhibits the ridiculous accidents and reverses to which human life is liable, not 'the stuff' of which it is composed. He seldom probes to the quick, or penetrates beyond the surface; and, therefore, he leaves no stings in the minds of his readers, and in this respect is far less interesting than Fielding. [...] We read *Roderick Random* as an entertaining story; for the particular accidents and modes of life which it describes have ceased to exist: but we regard *Tom Jones* as a real history; because the author never stops short of those essential principles which lie at the bottom of all our actions, and in which we feel an immediate interest—*intus et in*

*cute*.<sup>123</sup>

It requires little effort to see in these passages a foreshadowing of Lewes's praise for the characterisation of *Pendennis*: Thackeray 'seizes *characters* where other writers seize only *characteristics*; he does not give you a peculiarity for the man, he places the man himself, that "bundle of motives," before you'.<sup>124</sup>

Particularly relevant for present purposes is the similarity of Lewes's and Hazlitt's conceptions of the relationship between the actual and the ideal in art. Central to Hazlitt's aesthetics, of painting as well as of literature, was the notion that the actual and the ideal were not distinct but organically connected; indeed, as Uttara Natarajan puts it, 'The symbiotic relation between particular and ideal' is 'at the heart of Hazlitt's philosophy', from metaphysics to aesthetics.<sup>125</sup> As Hazlitt wrote in 'Fine Arts', reprinted in the first volume of *Criticisms on Art* in 1843 and therefore readily available to Lewes, 'the common notion of the *ideal*, as something quite distinct from *actual* nature' is wrong. In terms that find an echo in Lewes's later definition of 'Idealism' as the 'vision of realities in their highest and most affecting forms', Hazlitt stated that all great works of art owe their pre-eminence and perfection to 'one and the same principle,—*the immediate imitation of nature*':

The *ideal* is not the preference of that which exists only in the mind, to that which exists in nature; but the preference of that which is fine in nature to that which is less so. There is nothing fine in art but what is taken almost immediately, and, as it were, in the mass, from what is fine in nature.<sup>126</sup>

He touched on the same theme – 'the highest art is the imitation of the finest nature' – in 'On

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<sup>123</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the English Novelists': *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 6, pp. 110; 112; 113; 116.

<sup>124</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Pendennis', *The Leader*, vol. 1, no. 39 (December 21 1850), pp. 929-30: *Versatile Victorian: Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*, p. 115.

<sup>125</sup> Uttara Natarajan, 'Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Ideal Form', *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 493-503 (p. 497).

<sup>126</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Fine Arts', *Supplement to the Fourth and Fifth Editions of the Encyclopædia Britannica* (1816), vol. 1, pp. 540-64: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 18 (1933), pp. 111-13.

the Elgin Marbles', also reprinted in *Criticisms on Art*, where he wrote of the marbles that

the chief excellence of the figures depends on their having been copied from nature, and not from imagination. [...] The learned [...] make suppose that the truth of nature is, in the Elgin Marbles, combined with ideal forms. If by *ideal forms* they mean fine natural forms, we have nothing to object; but if they mean that the sculptors of the Theseus and Ilissus got the forms out of their own heads, and then tacked the truth of nature to them, we can only say, 'Let them look again, let them look again.' We consider the Elgin Marbles as a demonstration of the impossibility of separating art from nature without a proportionable loss at every remove.<sup>127</sup>

He had also made the point in 'On Imitation', reprinted in 1841 ('It is not to be denied that the study of the *ideal* in art, if separated from the study of nature, may have the effect [...] of producing dissatisfaction and contempt', whereas 'to the genuine artist, truth, nature, beauty, are almost different names for the same thing'),<sup>128</sup> and he made it again in another essay, reprinted in the second volume of *Criticisms on Art* (1844), where he stated that 'The knowledge of what is contained in nature is the only foundation of legitimate art', with 'the test of real genius' being 'the perception of beauty and power, in whatever objects or in whatever degree they subsist [...]. The principle is the same in painting an archangel's or a butterfly's wing'. Once again he illustrated his argument by reference to the Elgin Marbles:

They are high art, confessedly: but they are also true art [...]. They do not deviate from truth and nature in order to arrive at a fancied superiority to truth and nature. They do not represent a vapid abstraction, but the entire, undoubted, concrete object they profess to imitate. They are like casts of the finest living forms in the world, taken in momentary action. They are nothing more: and therefore certain great critics who had been educated in the ideal school of art, think nothing of them. They do not conform to a vague, unmeaning standard, made out of the fastidious likings or dislikings of the artist; they are carved out of the living, imperishable forms of nature, as the marble of which they are composed was hewn from its native rock. They contain the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.<sup>129</sup>

Hazlitt's insistence that great art is the product, not of the artist's imagination, but of their

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<sup>127</sup> W[illiam] H[azlitt], 'On the Elgin Marbles', *The London Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 26 (February 1822), pp. 153-56; vol. 5, no. 29 (May 1822), pp. 445-55: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 18, pp. 149; 145-46.

<sup>128</sup> William Hazlitt, 'No. XXVIII. On Imitation', *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners* (2 vols) (1817), vol. II, pp. 11-19: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 4 (1930), p. 75.

<sup>129</sup> [William Hazlitt], 'Farington's Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds', *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 34, no. 67 (August 1820), pp. 79-108: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 16 (1933), pp. 206-207.

attention to ‘truth and nature’, anticipates Lewes’s critical writings of a generation later, and it is not difficult to believe that when Lewes proposed testing the artistic power of a young writer by ‘set[ting] him to describe the brick wall opposite’, he had at the back of his mind such observations of Hazlitt as ‘This is the test and triumph of originality, not to shew us what has never been, [...] but to point out to us what is before our eyes and under our feet’,<sup>130</sup> or (again reprinted in *Criticisms on Art*) ‘There are those, indeed, who think that *not to copy nature*, is the rule for attaining perfection. Because they cannot paint the objects which they have seen, they feel themselves qualified to paint the ideas which they have not seen’.<sup>131</sup> In short, Hazlitt’s notion of the manner in which the genius of the artist transforms the actual into the ideal is sufficiently similar to Lewes’s that it seems reasonable to infer that Hazlitt influenced Lewes in this regard also, and thus indirectly influenced Wilkie Collins’s preface to *Basil*. Indeed, on one occasion Hazlitt used the same metaphor to express his aesthetic as Collins was to use in the Letter of Dedication. For Hazlitt, the conclusion come to by ‘certain writers of romance [...] that they had only to quit the vulgar path of truth and reality, in order that they “might ascend the brightest heaven of invention” [...] is by no means the truth’:

All art is built upon nature; and the tree of knowledge lifts its branches to the clouds, only as it has struck its roots deep into the earth. He is the greatest artist, not who leaves the materials of nature behind him but who carries them with him into the world of invention;—and the larger and more entire the masses in which he is able to apply them to his purpose, the stronger and more durable will his productions be.<sup>132</sup>

Whether or not he recognised his influence on the Letter of Dedication, Lewes declared that he ‘endorse[d] every sentence’ of it when he came to review *Basil* in *The Leader*. But with

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<sup>130</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘Essay V. [On Genius and Common Sense.] The Same Subject Continued’, *Table-Talk; or, Original Essays* (1821), pp. 93-111: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 8 (1931), p. 43.

<sup>131</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘On a Landscape of Nicolas Poussin’, *Table-Talk; or, Original Essays*, vol. II (1822), pp. 3-15: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 8, p. 170.

<sup>132</sup> W[illiam] H[azlitt], ‘Introduction to an Account of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Discourses. IV: On the Ideal’, *The Champion*, no. 105 (January 8 1815), pp. 7-8: *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 18, p. 77.

the candour that he claimed their friendship ‘insist[ed] on’, he made clear that his colleague had failed to transmute what were said to be realities into ‘real-looking fictions’. The execution of Collins’s story fell very far short of its professedly realist intention:

[W]hen Wilkie Collins comes to look at *Basil* from [the distance of years] we are persuaded he will think with us that he has failed in the human and aesthetic aspects of his story. He will feel with us that the characters want the sharp decisive outlines of reality [...]. He will feel with us that however true as a matter of fact the main incident may be, it is not truly presented in this story; an air of unreality pervades the book which makes even commonplace incidents look “improbable.” We need not tell him that although Truth *is* stranger than Fiction, the very nature of Art forbids the admission of such an excuse. In the true circumstances, however strange, the details all agree, and could we but *know* all, the improbability would disappear. In fiction, the author knows all; it is he creates the details, and his task is to *make* the improbable probable; otherwise where would be the limit? A man might pile extravagance on absurdity and laugh at all objection, by saying “Truth is stranger than Fiction; so strange that you cannot say what is possible and what impossible.” There is also this further consideration. Men often declare they “have drawn their figures from nature.” Truly: a long way *from* Nature! The question never is, Did you have a living model? The question always is: Have you created a living figure?

In taking up an improbable event Wilkie Collins has arranged his plot so as to make it probable; and in his own mind the scheme may lay itself out consistently enough. But to the reader the case is otherwise. The reader rebels against Sherwin’s vulgarity, and motives, no less than against Margaret’s deceit, not because these things are unreal in themselves but because they have not reality in their presentation.

As ‘a plain yet not exceptional example of the unreality to which we refer’, Lewes selected ‘the first meeting of the lovers in an omnibus’. In the Letter of Dedication, Collins claimed that his pursuit of Reality meant that he had ‘not hesitated to violate some of the sentimental conventionalities of sentimental fiction’:

For instance, the first love-meeting of two of the personages in this book, occurs (where the real love-meeting from which it is drawn, occurred) in the very last place, and under the very last circumstances which the artifices of sentimental writing would sanction. Will my lovers excite ridicule instead of interest, because I have truly represented them as seeing each other where hundreds of other lovers have first seen each other, as hundreds of people will readily admit when they read the passage to which I refer? I am sanguine enough to think not (vol. I, pp. xi-xii).

But as Lewes pointed out, Collins had not put into practice the doctrine that he purported to preach:

Love at first sight is an exceptional occasion. Yet we have most of us some suggestive experience which will lend credence to love at first sight, if that be properly

presented; we have all felt a strange thrill at the sight of a certain face—a presentiment that in that person lies some occult power which will work on our lives as an influence—and to this experience Wilkie Collins appeals in the passage we are about to quote:—

“[...] It seemed as if I must have known her in some former state of being—as if I had died for her, or she for me, after living *for* each other and *with* each other in some past world; and that we were now revived and reunited again, for a new life in a new earth. But, I repeat it, I cannot describe to others, except by phrases which must read like meaningless rhapsody, the mysterious attraction which drew me to her, heart and soul, the moment she appeared before my eyes.”

The confession that what he has said will sound like “meaningless rhapsody” will not save this passage from being denounced as a swerving from truth into convention. It is true that a man may thrill at the sight of a girl, even though her veil be down, but it is not true, in any licence of exaggerated diction, that he could feel he had lived and died for her and she for him in some former state of being after living together, and that they were now to be united; and the “rhapsody” which says he did, is a mistake in art. For observe: this meeting in the omnibus, upon which as we have seen great stress is laid by the author for its anti-conventionalism, is a critical incident, and *because* it appeals to our common-place realities, demands more than common-place reality for its presentation. Did Romeo tell Juliet he had formerly died for her, no one would doubt his word; but what Romeo may do in Verona in blank verse, Basil may not do in an omnibus in prose!<sup>133</sup>

Lewes was surely right: despite his claim in the Letter of Dedication to have violated ‘the sentimental conventionalities of sentimental fiction’, Collins does here ‘swerv[e] from truth into convention’. But Lewes’s criticisms of Collins’s contraventions of the aesthetic of ‘reality’ that he claimed to have adopted are as obvious as they are just – other reviewers also noted what Lewes described as the unreality and improbability of *Basil*<sup>134</sup> – and could have

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<sup>133</sup> [George Henry Lewes], ‘Basil’, *The Leader*, vol. 3, no. 140 (November 27 1852), pp. 1141-42. Lewes was not the only critic to comment adversely on Basil’s ‘phrases which must read like meaningless rhapsody’, which Collins omitted from the revised edition of 1862 (see Collins, *Basil*, ed. Goldman, pp. 28-29); another wrote that ‘We have no hesitation in pronouncing this not only “meaningless rhapsody” but absolute nonsense’ (*Basil: a Story of Modern Life*, *The New Quarterly Review*, vol. 2, no. 5 (January 1853), pp. 94-96 (p. 94)).

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, [John William Kaye], “Esmond” and “Basil”, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, vol. 32 (December 1852), pp. 576-86: *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 35 (‘That “Basil” will be pronounced “improbable” we do not doubt’); *Basil: a Story of Modern Life*, *The New Quarterly Review*, vol. 2, no. 5 (January 1853), pp. 94-96 (p. 96) (‘[T]he production, as a whole, in artistic language, “wants nature”’); *Basil, A Story of Modern Life*, *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 26860 (January 25 1853), p. 3 (‘[T]he evolution of [the plot] is conducted with the greatest skill; the energetic rapidity and vivid colouring of the style disguising some [...] degree of improbability in its basis’); ‘The Progress of Fiction as an Art’, *The Westminster Review*, vol. 60, no. 118 (October 1853), pp. 342-74: *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 43 (Collins has ‘increased the displeasure

come as no surprise to any student of his reviews in *The Leader* over the previous couple of years. For example, the observation that Basil's rhapsody on meeting Margaret in an omnibus 'because it appeals to our common-place realities, demands more than common-place reality for its presentation' echoes such earlier reviews as those of Robert Bell's *The Ladder of Gold* (1850) ('[F]rom the very truthfulness of many scenes we are made painfully aware of the exaggeration of others. The nearer a representation approaches reality the more objectionable become all departures from it'),<sup>135</sup> or Eliza Lynn's *Realities*:

The attempt to describe the realities of Life is singularly ambitious, because the difficulties of Art become intensified the nearer its subject and form approach to the Actual, while retaining the purposes of the Ideal. A tragedy in prose, taken from modern life, is ten times as difficult as a tragedy in verse moving among the ill-understood fashions of the past.<sup>136</sup>

Similarly, the observation that 'Men often declare they "have drawn their figures from nature."' Truly: a long way *from* Nature! The question never is, Did you have a living model? The question always is: Have you created a living figure?' is reminiscent of remarks already quoted above such as that writers 'start with a dim unconscious theory that Life is somewhat as represented on the Stage and in Three Volumes, and drawing from the models found there, assure you they have "copied from life"', or that the characters in *Florence Sackville* are 'some of them obviously taken from life, but taken *from* life, to be rouged, wigged, spangled, and set before the footlights'.

The more readily it is acknowledged that Lewes's criticisms of *Basil* should have been predictable to him, however, the more necessary it becomes to ask why Collins should have

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[his subject] excites, by his resolution to spare us no revolting details. Yet he has contrived to make those details appear improbable'); see also Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 20 December 1852: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, pp. 823-24 (p. 823) ('I think the probabilities here and there require a little more respect than you are disposed to shew them').

<sup>135</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'The Ladder of Gold', *The Leader*, vol. 1, no. 37 (December 7 1850), pp. 878-79 (p. 879).

<sup>136</sup> [George Henry Lewes], 'Realities', *The Leader*, vol. 2, no. 62 (May 31 1851), pp. 517-18 (p. 517).

thought it appropriate to claim that his text conformed to the aesthetic of reality that Lewes advocated in *The Leader*. It could be said that the answer is obvious: he was concerned not so much with the truth of the claim as with the claim itself, and was, in the words of Peter Ackroyd quoted earlier in this chapter, ‘exaggerating the novel’s realism as a way of making it seem “new” and “up to date”’ in order ‘to acquire as many readers as possible’. (Indeed, Collins may have been hinting as much when he wrote in the Letter of Dedication that he was ‘trying if I could not successfully address myself, at once, to the readiest sympathies and the largest number of readers, by writing a story of our own times’ (vol. I, p. viii).) But to regard Collins’s claim to have ‘garner[ed] up’ the Actual ‘as a text to speak from’ as no more than a device to attract readers is to overlook the presence in the novel as a whole of the other “new” and “up to date” issues that have been identified in this thesis, and in particular the aesthetic of un-Academic naturalism in portraiture. The use that Collins makes of that aesthetic in the body of the story is rather more complex than the use that Ackroyd suggests that he is making of Lewes’s aesthetic of reality in the Letter of Dedication; as was seen in chapter 3 above, Collins causes Basil to imitate the aesthetic of naturalism in his portraits of Mr Sherwin, Mannion, and Margaret, only to undercut the imitation by having him faithfully represent the fleeting expressions of Mannion and Margaret to the reader while being unable himself to recognise the significance of those expressions for a ‘right reading’ of their characters. That ironic use of the aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture in order to expose Basil as a fallible narrator prompts the further question whether Collins’s assertion that his story had been written in accordance with the superficially similar aesthetic of reality in fiction also serves a more complex purpose than simply to highlight the up-to-dateness of the novel.

The answer to that question becomes clear when it is appreciated that it was not only himself

that Collins was associating with the aesthetic of reality in prose fiction; he associated Basil with it also, by causing him to imitate it in much the same way as he caused him to imitate the aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture. It was seen at the beginning of this chapter that in the opening pages of the novel Collins presents Basil as an author with a literary *curriculum vitae* very similar to his own, an author who, like Collins, has abandoned historical romance in order to write what is said to be an autobiography set in the present day. Then, at the very end of his narrative, in the letter to John Bernard with which the book concludes, Basil has ‘a word or two to say on the subject of preparing the autobiography for press’. His only instruction to his editor is that he must

Let none of the passages in which I have related events, or described characters, be either softened or suppressed. I am well aware of the tendency, in some readers, to denounce truth itself as improbable, unless their own personal experience has borne witness to it; and it is on this very account that I am firm in my determination to allow of no cringing beforehand to anticipated incredulities. What I have written is Truth; and it shall go into the world as Truth should—entirely uncompromised; honest and pure in its own identity. Let my style be corrected as completely as you will; but leave characters and events which are taken from realities, real as they are (vol. III, pp. 291-92).

Those words are unmistakably reminiscent of the words of the Letter of Dedication, in which Collins claimed to have ‘[d]irect[ed] my characters and my story [...] towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it’, even though he had not thought it necessary

while adhering to realities, to adhere to common-place, everyday realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader’s belief in the probability of my story, by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith (vol. I, p. xiii),

and it is surely significant that they were written at very much the same time as the Letter of Dedication, more than a year after Collins had first figured his narrator as a writer in his own image. No part of the paragraph in which Basil gives instructions for the preparation of his story for the press is to be found in Collins’s manuscript;<sup>137</sup> it must have been added at the

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<sup>137</sup> See British Library, Add. MS 41060, folio 84<sup>r</sup>: the manuscript text goes straight from ‘Art may sometimes

time of his revision of volume 2 of the first draft text in September 1852. The significance of that late addition is highlighted by another change to the draft just a few lines earlier. The manuscript text (folio 84<sup>r</sup>) reads:

How are the pages which I am about to send you to be concluded? In the novel-reading and novel-writing sense of the word my story has no real conclusion. [...] Is it fit that for the sake of effect I should set myself to make a conclusion – and terminate by fiction what has begun and proceeded as truth. In the interests of Art, as well as in the interests of honesty, surely not!

The printed text (vol. III, pp. 288-89), however, reads:

How are the pages which I am about to send you to be concluded? In the novel-reading sense of the word, my story has no real conclusion. [...] Is it fit that I should set myself, for the sake of effect, to *make* a conclusion, and terminate by fiction what has begun, and, thus far, has proceeded in truth? In the interests of Art, as well as in the interests of Reality, surely not!

Given that he was at the same time amending the draft to include an assertion by Basil that the characters and events of his narrative were ‘taken from realities’, Collins’s alteration of ‘in the interests of honesty’ to ‘in the interests of Reality’ – a term that is repeatedly used in the Letter of Dedication, and one that appears so frequently in G. H. Lewes’s reviews of fiction in *The Leader* that it has been used in this thesis as a label to characterise the aesthetic that Lewes was there promulgating – can hardly be regarded as fortuitous.

Just as he was preparing his own manuscript for the press, then, and contemplating what was to become the Letter of Dedication, Collins chose to reinforce the identification of Basil with himself as a writer by associating him, not only with his own literary career and ambitions, but also with the aesthetic in accordance with which he claimed to have written his novel. Inasmuch as he thus upheld Basil’s imitation of the aesthetic of reality in prose fiction while simultaneously undercutting his imitation of the aesthetic of naturalism in portraiture, it

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imitate, but can never hope to improve’ (vol. III, p. 291 of the published text) to ‘In regard to the surviving actors in my story, I have little to say which it can concern the ordinary reader to know’ (vol. III, p. 292).

seems clear that Collins was concerned to contrast Basil's imitations of the two aesthetics. The point goes further, however. The fact that – as was seen in the Introduction – Collins was writing at a time when he was ceasing to 'live very much in the society of artists' and becoming increasingly close to Charles Dickens and to writers in Dickens's circle suggests that he was concerned not only to contrast Basil's imitations of the aesthetics but also to contrast the aesthetics themselves, and to express a judgement as to their relative artistic potential. For no matter how faithful to nature they strive to be, a portraitist can only represent what they have perceived about their subject; if they have failed to discern a truth about the subject's character, then they will be unable to communicate that truth to the viewer. Put another way, a painter cannot paint a portrait that reveals their subject's true character if they believe that the subject's fiendishly malign expression is only an optical illusion produced by lightning. A novelist, however, is not so limited. They can write a fallible narrator, such as Basil, who describes to the reader all that he sees and so enables the reader to understand the true significance of what is being described, even though the narrator themselves is unable to achieve the same understanding until later. By demonstrating the ability of the novelist to deploy irony, an effect not available to the portraitist, Collins was seeking in what J. E. Millais called his 'very clever' novel<sup>138</sup> to draw the attention of Millais and his other painter friends to the greater possibilities for the representation of character that are available to the writer of fiction than to the painter of portraits.

By way of coda, the next, final chapter considers Collins's restatement and development of that theme in a passage of *The Woman in White* published just over seven years after he wrote the Letter of Dedication to *Basil*.

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<sup>138</sup> John Everett Millais, letter to Mrs Thomas Combe, December 1852: Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, vol. I, pp. 190-91 (p. 190).

## CHAPTER 5: 'SYMPATHIES THAT LIE TOO DEEP FOR WORDS'

This chapter discusses briefly the way in which in *The Woman in White* Collins restated and developed the theme that the previous chapter identified in *Basil*, that there are greater possibilities for the representation of character available to the writer of fiction than to the painter of portraits. It is argued that Collins's development of that theme was inspired by a passage in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, a work that he must have read shortly before he began to write *The Woman in White*.

Collins did not return to the issue of the representational capabilities of portraiture and fiction in either of the two novels that followed *Basil*, *Hide and Seek* and *The Dead Secret*; indeed, the latter is not concerned with painting at all, and the former touches on the aesthetics of art only for humorous effect, in the scene where the painter Valentine Blyth gives a comically confused account of the principles on which he has painted two pictures destined to be submitted to the forthcoming exhibition of the Royal Academy.<sup>1</sup> He did, however, come back to the subject almost a decade later in *The Woman in White*, and did so in a manner that both repeated and went significantly beyond what he had written in *Basil*. Early in his narrative, Walter Hartright tries to remember the moment when he first saw Laura Fairlie:

How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations, and from all that has happened in the later time? How can I see her again as she looked when my eyes first rested on her—as she should look, now, to the eyes that are about to see

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<sup>1</sup> See Collins, *Hide and Seek*, vol. II, pp. 279-82 (“I take the liberty of dividing all art into two great classes, the landscape subjects, and the figure subjects; and I venture to describe these classes [...] under the respective titles of Art Pastoral and Art Mystic.” Art Pastoral is only to be attained “by taking Nature merely as a foundation, and building up upon it an airy Ideal, which shall elevate the mind, and diffuse sublime poetry and philosophy over laborious Reality, which cannot be said to diffuse anything but itself”; Art Mystic can be defined as “aiming at the illustration of fact on the highest imaginative principles. It takes a scene, for instance, from history [...] and represents that scene as exactly and naturally as possible”; besides the representation of the scene itself, however, there must also be “indicated, mystically, [...] the spirit of the age which produced that scene, and the [...] prophetic foreshadowing of future periods [...] all on the same canvas”).

her in these pages?

Walter sets about his attempt to ‘see her again’ by referring, not to his recollection of the occasion, but to a watercolour portrait of Laura that he painted shortly afterwards; as Sophia Andres puts it, ‘When we first meet Laura [...], it is not herself but rather Walter’s Pygmalion-like recreation of her’.<sup>2</sup>

The water-colour drawing that I made of Laura Fairlie, at an after period, in the place and attitude in which I first saw her, lies on my desk while I write. I look at it, and there dawns upon me brightly, from the dark greenish-brown background of the summer-house, a light, youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress, the pattern of it formed by broad alternate stripes of delicate blue and white. A scarf of the same material sits crisply and closely round her shoulders, and a little straw hat of the natural colour, plainly and sparingly trimmed with ribbon to match the gown, covers her head, and throws its soft pearly shadow over the upper part of her face. Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown—not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy—that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat. It is plainly parted and drawn back over her ears, and the line of it ripples naturally as it crosses her forehead. The eyebrows are rather darker than the hair; and the eyes are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets, so seldom seen in real life. Lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and a better world. The charm—most gently and yet most distinctly expressed—which they shed over the whole face, 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. It is hard to see that the lower part of the face is too delicately refined away towards the chin to be in full and fair proportion with the upper part; that the nose, in escaping the aquiline bend (always hard and cruel in a woman, no matter how abstractedly perfect it may be), has erred a little in the other extreme, and has missed the ideal straightness of line; and that the sweet, sensitive lips are subject to a slight nervous contraction, when she smiles, which draws them upward a little at one corner, towards the cheek. It might be possible to note these blemishes in another woman’s face but it is not easy to dwell on them in hers, so subtly are they connected with all that is individual and characteristic in her expression, and so closely does the expression depend for its full play and life, in every other feature, on the moving impulse of the eyes.

Notwithstanding the ekphrastic detail of this account of his drawing, however, Walter recognises that it is not possible for him adequately to describe to the reader how Laura ‘looked when my eyes first rested on her’. He cannot after all ‘separate her from my own

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<sup>2</sup> Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, p. 85.

sensations, and from all that has happened in the later time’:

Does my poor portrait of her, my fond, patient labour of long and happy days, show me these things? Ah, how few of them are in the dim mechanical drawing, and how many in the mind with which I regard it! A fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress, trifling with the leaves of a sketch-book, while she looks up from it with truthful, innocent blue eyes—that is all the drawing can say; all, perhaps, that even the deeper reach of thought and pen can say in their language, either.<sup>3</sup>

Walter’s acknowledgement that the language of words has a ‘deeper reach’ than the language of portraiture is recognisably a restatement of the idea whose development in *Basil* has been traced in chapter 4 above, that a novelist’s portrait in words is capable of evoking a more complex response from the reader than a painted portrait can evoke from the viewer. Indeed, the idea that the writer can convey what the painter cannot underlies the entirety of Walter’s account of his ‘dim mechanical drawing’. In the words of Irene Tucker,

What is striking about this passage is the way in which the narrator manages to describe precisely that which he announces cannot be easily seen, e.g., “It is hard to see that the lower part of the face is too delicately refined away towards the chin to be in full and fair proportion with the upper part.” The narrative stance refuses to privilege perception. Though it remains difficult to see Laura’s faults, we are made aware of their existence, because the passage describes precisely what we cannot see.<sup>4</sup>

(While it is at first perhaps surprising that Walter, an artist of sufficient professional standing to be ‘a member of one of the Water-Colour Societies’,<sup>5</sup> should so readily affirm the superiority of the pen to the pencil, any such surprise evaporates by the end of the novel. As Jenny Bourne Taylor observes, the text makes explicit ‘the relationship between the control over writing and the consolidation of social identity’:<sup>6</sup> although it is because of his skill as an

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<sup>3</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, pp. 48-50. Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy observe that the vagueness of Walter’s description of Laura is striking: her identity ‘can be summed up by nothing more than a water colour portrait of her; her ability to fit into the role of a charming and innocent young girl is more important than the individuality [Walter] is supposedly reclaiming’ (Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy, ‘A Man’s Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*’, *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Winter 1990), pp. 392-402 (p. 393)).

<sup>4</sup> Irene Tucker, ‘Paranoid Imaginings: Wilkie Collins, The Rugeley Poisoner, and the Invisibility of Novelistic Ekphrasis’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 8, no. 1 (January 2010), pp. 147-67 (p. 154).

<sup>5</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home*, p. 110.

artist that Walter is first engaged as drawing-master at Limmeridge House and later able to support Laura and Marian Halcombe during their time hiding in London, it is by his ability with the pen, as editor and part-author of the written proof of the conspiracy against Laura, that he secures her social reinstatement and his own position as father of ‘*the Heir of Limmeridge*’<sup>7</sup> – a position that he could never have hoped to attain as an artist.)

Walter then goes on to develop a further theme that also appears in *Basil*, that our emotional responses to what Basil calls ‘the mysterious spiritual communications constantly passing and repassing between us in this life’ (vol. I, p. 112) may be incapable of representation even in the language of words. As soon as Margaret sits down opposite him in the omnibus, Basil feels

her influence upon me directly—an influence that I cannot describe—an influence that I had never experienced in my life before, which I shall never experience again.

[...] It seemed as if I must have known her in some former state of being—as if I had died for her, or she for me, after living *for* each other and *with* each other in some past world; and that we were now revived and reunited again, for a new life in a new earth. But, I repeat it, I cannot describe to others, except by phrases which must read like meaningless rhapsody, the mysterious attraction which drew me to her, heart and soul, the moment she appeared before my eyes (vol. I, pp. 114-15).

Such protestations of ineffability are, of course, common enough in fiction, and Basil is peculiarly prone to them: he professes himself equally unable to describe the impression made by his sister Clara’s voice, smile, and manner (vol. I, p. 74), the nature of the influence that invariably preserves Clara from the presumption of others (vol. I, pp. 82-83), the fidget and bewilderment that Mr Sherwin’s incessant blinking occasions in him (vol. I, p. 204), the wretchedness of breakfast with his family on the day of his secret marriage (vol. I, p. 283), Mrs Sherwin’s anxious expression as she observes Basil and Margaret together in the presence of Mannion for the first time (vol. II, p. 30), the vexation and irritation caused by

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<sup>7</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 643.

Margaret's unaccountable alterations of manner towards him after he returns to London after a week at home in the country (vol. II, p. 120), and the awful change in his father's expression when informed that his son is married to a linen-draper's daughter (vol. II, p. 241). In any event, Walter Hartright endorses and universalises Basil's inability adequately to represent in words the sensation of falling in love:

The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared. Sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts, are touched, at such times, by other charms than those which the senses feel and which the resources of expression can realise. The mystery which underlies the beauty of women is never raised above the reach of all expression until it has claimed kindred with the deeper mystery in our own souls. Then, and then only, has it passed beyond the narrow region on which light falls, in this world, from the pencil and the pen.

Unlike Basil, however, Walter goes on to suggest a means by which the reader can hope to partake of the sensation that the writer is unable to describe:

Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir. Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look which we both remember so well. Let her voice speak the music that you once loved best, attuned as sweetly to your ear as to mine. Let her footstep, as she comes and goes, in these pages, be like that other footstep to whose airy fall your own heart once beat time. Take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy; and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly, as the living woman who dwells in mine.<sup>8</sup>

Collins is here introducing an idea about the representation of the otherwise unrepresentable

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<sup>8</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 50. Whether or not one accepts her conclusion that the explanation for the oddity is to be found 'by appeal to [...] Marx's notion of commodity fetishism', Ann Cvetkovich is undoubtedly right when she says that

What's odd about [Walter's] claim to love Laura at first sight is that the novel itself seems to demystify it by having Laura's appearance preceded by Anne's. Why, after all, does Walter not fall in love with Anne Catherick given that she looks the same as Laura?

(Ann Cvetkovich, 'Ghostlier Determinations: The Economy of Sensation and *The Woman in White*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Fall 1989), pp. 24-43 (pp. 39; 28)). As D. A. Miller puts it, 'Laura Fairlie is not the first woman to quicken [Walter's] pulses but rather the object of a repetition compulsion whose origin lies in his [...] first encounter with the Woman in White' (D. A. Miller, 'Cage aux folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', *Representations*, no. 14 (Spring 1986), pp. 107-36 (p. 123)); see also Rachel Ablow, 'Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 37, no. 1/2 (Fall 2003/Spring 2004), pp. 158-80 (p. 166) ('Laura is not the first woman to alter Walter's pulses. She may be the first to stir them, but by the time he meets her, his heartbeat has already been arrested by her half-sister on the moonlit highway').

that might have appeared, but did not, in *Basil*, where the immediate context is so very similar. Although the ‘sympathies’ between a man and the woman he first loves ‘lie too deep for words’, so that Walter’s account of his watercolour portrait of Laura is no more able to communicate to the reader what he saw when he fell in love with her than Basil is able to describe – except by ‘phrases which must read like meaningless rhapsody’ – the ‘mysterious attraction’ which drew him to Margaret, there is one means by which Walter can hope to represent Laura ‘as she looked when my eyes first rested on her—as she should look, now, to the eyes that are about to see her in these pages’. He can do so by appealing, not to the reader’s intellect, their understanding of the visual or verbal picture that is put before them, but to their emotions: ‘Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir.’ Only those who have themselves fallen in love with a woman in the same way as Walter fell in love with Laura can envisage what he saw when he first saw her. But because they will envisage what Walter saw by consulting their own feelings for the first woman they loved rather than by attending to Walter’s description of Laura, what they will envisage is not Laura, ‘the living woman’ who dwells in Walter’s fancy, but ‘the visionary nursling of [their] own fancy’, the woman with whom they first fell in love.

Lucy Hartley draws attention to the parallels between Walter’s invocation of what she calls ‘the subjectivity of feeling’ and the work of such early nineteenth-century philosophers of beauty as Alexander Walker and John MacVicar; she notes in particular that the latter drew a distinction between ‘*Beauty*’, by which he meant ‘a something in an external object of regard’, and ‘*The emotion of the beautiful*’, by which he meant ‘the corresponding state of mind in the observer’, and suggests that Walter’s notion that an appreciation of Laura’s beauty depends upon the experienced character of the observer rather than the observed

represents ‘precisely the sort of transference which MacVicar identified’.<sup>9</sup> It is argued here, however, that it is possible to identify a much closer parallel to this passage of *The Woman in White*, which Collins wrote at some time between 15 August 1859 (when he began writing the story)<sup>10</sup> and 10 December 1859 (when the passage was published in *All The Year Round*),<sup>11</sup> in another novel that was first published in the same year – a novel written by an author personally known to Collins. *Adam Bede* was published on 1 February 1859 and soon became an immense critical and popular success; in the words of Gordon Haight, ‘No book had made such an impression since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* swept the world.’<sup>12</sup> Its author, ‘George Eliot’, was by the summer of that year widely known, at least in literary circles, to be Marian Evans, who had for some years been living with Collins’s old friend G. H. Lewes as his wife. As was noted in chapter 4 above, Collins dined with the Leweses at least once in the autumn of 1859; indeed, Catherine Peters suggests that Collins modelled the appearance of *The Woman in White*’s ugly yet attractive Marian Halcombe on Marian Lewes:<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, pp. 128-29, quoting Rev. J. G. MacVicar, *On the Beautiful, The Picturesque, The Sublime* (London: Scott, Webster, and Geary, 1837), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> See the autograph note dated 4 October 1860 that Collins appended to the manuscript of *The Woman in White* (The Morgan Library and Museum, MA 79.1, folio [i], transcribed in Collins, *The Woman in White*, Appendix A, p. 647) (‘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’).

<sup>11</sup> ‘The Woman in White’, *All the Year Round*, vol. 2, no. 33 (December 10 1859), pp. 141-47 (pp. 142-43).

<sup>12</sup> Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 279.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Hartright’s memorable account of his first sight of Marian Halcombe – a passage that, in D. A. Miller’s no less memorable words, ‘develops all the rhetorical suspense of a striptease’ as it builds towards the unveiling of Marian’s face (Miller, ‘*Cage aux folles*’, p. 126) – merits extensive quotation:

The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays. [...] The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!

Never was the old conventional maxim, that Nature cannot err, more flatly contradicted—never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black

Wilkie changed the colour of eyes and hair, making Marian dark, as a contrast to Laura and Anne Catherick; but he kept almost everything else that descriptions of George Eliot comment on: the heavy, masculine jaw, the charm of expression, the beautiful speaking voice and the good figure.<sup>14</sup>

Be that as it may, it is all but inconceivable that Collins had not read *Adam Bede* by the time he began to write *The Woman in White*.

Queen Victoria was so taken by *Adam Bede* that she commissioned the artist Edward Henry Courbold to paint two large watercolours depicting scenes from the novel, one of Dinah Morris preaching from a cart (figure 5.1) and the other of Hetty Sorrel and Arthur

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hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete. To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream (Collins, *The Woman in White*, pp. 31-32).

<sup>14</sup> Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 217; see also Stephen Knight, *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), p. 78 ('Marian's complex attractions may in part derive from a clear physical, and mental, resemblance to [...] George Eliot').



Figure 5.1: Edward Henry Courbold, *Dinah Morris Preaching on the Common* (1861)  
watercolour and bodycolour, 76.0 × 55.5 cm (Royal Collection Trust)  
(Image © His Majesty King Charles III 2024).

Donnithorne in Mrs Poyser's dairy (figure 5.2). Courbold's pictures, faithfully based on

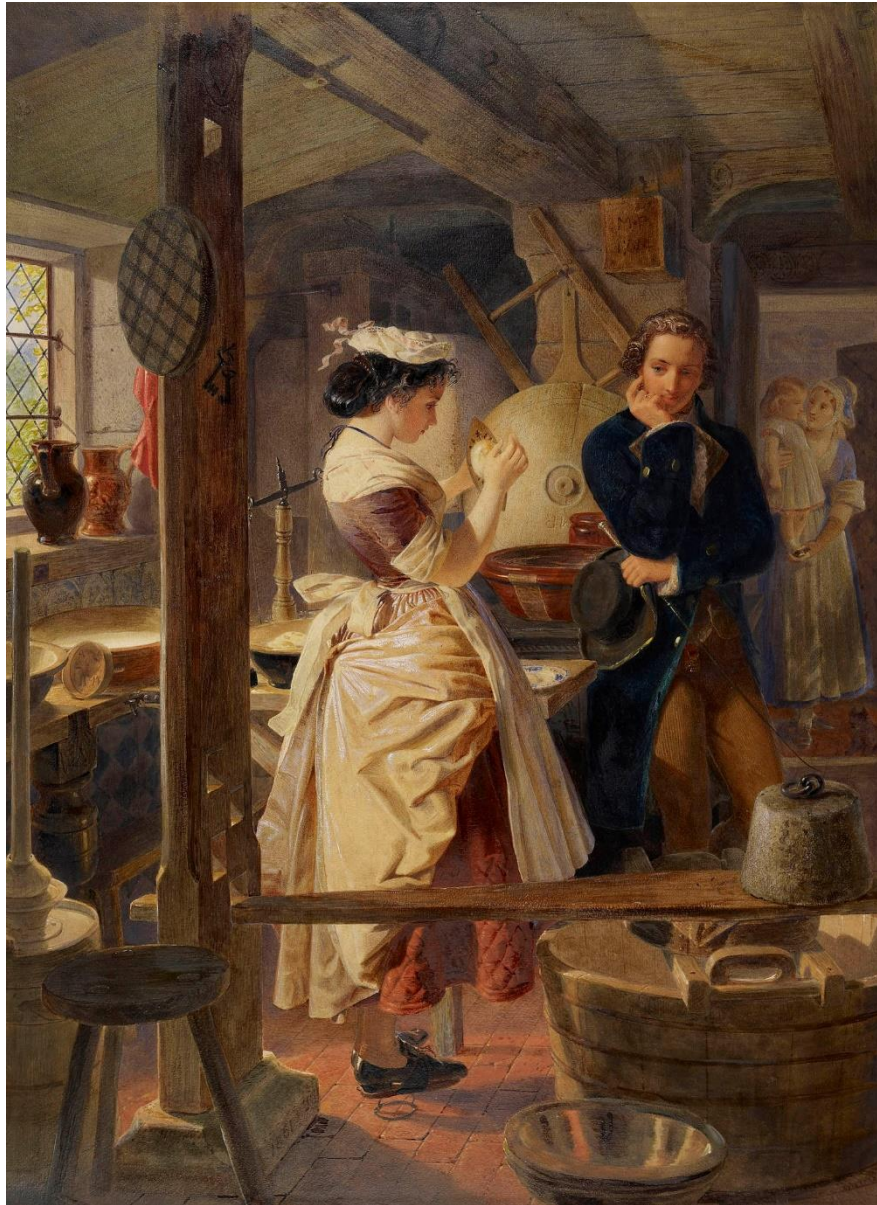


Figure 5.2: Edward Henry Courbold, *Hetty Sorrel and Squire Donnithorne in Mrs Poyser's Dairy* (1861), watercolour and bodycolour, 76.0 × 55.5 cm (Royal Collection Trust) (Image © His Majesty King Charles III 2024).

Eliot's descriptions of the appearance of her characters, are both painted in the same style. In the text from which they were derived, however, each of those descriptions is significantly different to the others. The account of Dinah Morris preaching comes first:

She held no book in her ungloved hands, but let them hang down lightly crossed before her, as she stood and turned her grey eyes on the people. [...] She stood with her left hand towards the descending sun, and leafy boughs screened her from its rays; but in this sober light the delicate colouring of her face seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening. It was a small oval face, of a uniform transparent whiteness, with an egg-like line of cheek and chin, a full but firm mouth, a delicate nostril, and a low perpendicular brow, surmounted by a rising arch of parting between

smooth locks of pale reddish hair. The hair was drawn straight back behind the ears, and covered, except for an inch or two above the brow, by a net Quaker cap. The eyebrows, of the same colour as the hair, were perfectly horizontal and firmly pencilled; the eyelashes, though no darker, were long and abundant; nothing was left blurred or unfinished. It was one of those faces that make one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals.<sup>15</sup>

Rather like Basil's no less comprehensive portraits of Mr Sherwin and Mannion, quoted in chapter 2 above, this description might be characterised as objective, by which is meant that there is no appeal to the subjective experience or imagination of the reader. By contrast, Eliot's very much less detailed account of the appearance of Arthur Donnithorne three chapters later invites the reader to consult their own catalogue of visual types:

[T]here entered a young gentleman in a riding-dress, with his right arm in a sling [...]. If you want to know more particularly how he looked, call to your remembrance some tawny-whiskered, brown-locked, clear-complexioned young Englishman whom you have met with in a foreign town, and been proud of as a fellow-countryman—well-washed, high-bred, white-handed, yet looking as if he could deliver well from the left shoulder and floor his man: I will not be so much of a tailor as to trouble your imagination with the difference of costume, and insist on the striped waistcoat, long-tailed coat, and low top-boots.<sup>16</sup>

This is not dissimilar to Collins's description of Annie Wray in *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box*, of whom he said – as was seen in the Introduction – that he preferred 'leaving the reader to form his own realisation':

Eschewing the magnificent beauties of his acquaintance, let him imagine her to be like any pretty intelligent girl whom he knows—any of those pleasant little fire-side angels, who can charm us even in a merino morning gown, darning an old pair of socks. Let this be the sort of female reality in the reader's mind; and neither author, nor heroine, need have any reason to complain.<sup>17</sup>

But while Eliot's description of the other character in Courbold's second painting, Hetty Sorrel, also calls on the reader to supplement the author's picture by their own, it does so in a way that is significantly different, and has no parallel in the early work of Wilkie Collins:

It is of little use for me to tell you that Hetty's cheek was like a rose-petal, that dimples played about her pouting lips, that her large dark eyes hid a soft roguishness

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<sup>15</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, *Mr. Wray's Cash-Box*, p. 6.

under their long lashes, and that her curly hair, though all pushed back under her round cap while she was at work, stole back in dark delicate rings on her forehead, and about her white shell-like ears; it is of little use for me to say how lovely was the contour of her pink-and-white neckerchief, tucked into her low plum-coloured stuff bodice, or how the linen butter-making apron, with its bib, seemed a thing to be imitated in silk by duchesses, since it fell in such charming lines, or how her brown stockings and thick-soled buckled shoes lost all that clumsiness which they must certainly have had when empty of her foot and ankle;—of little use, unless you have seen a woman who affected you as Hetty affected her beholders, for otherwise, though you might conjure up the image of a lovely woman, she would not in the least resemble that distracting kitten-like maiden. I might mention all the divine charms of a bright spring day, but if you had never in your life utterly forgotten yourself in straining your eyes after the mounting lark, or in wandering through the still lanes when the fresh-opened blossoms fill them with a sacred, silent beauty like that of fretted aisles, where would be the use of my descriptive catalogue? I could never make you know what I meant by a bright spring day.<sup>18</sup>

As well as parodying the hackneyed conventions of depictions of feminine beauty in fiction in such a way as to imply that those conventions involve what Hugh Witemeyer calls ‘a projection of male desire which has little to do with the real nature of women’ (‘as the passage unfolds, the voice of the male narrator takes on the clubby accents of a literate amorist recalling a particularly irresistible milkmaid’),<sup>19</sup> Eliot here describes Hetty’s appearance with a wealth of visual detail, as she does in the description of Dinah Morris, while simultaneously professing her inability to describe it at all and appealing to the reader to paint their own picture, as she does in the description of Arthur Donnithorne. There is, however, a crucial difference between Eliot’s appeal to the reader in the case of Arthur Donnithorne (and Collins’s similar appeal in the case of Annie Wray) and her appeal in the case of Hetty Sorrel. In the former instance, the reader is invited to summon up from memory the image of any handsome ‘young Englishman whom you have met with in a foreign town, and been proud of as a fellow-countryman’ or ‘any pretty intelligent girl whom he knows’. In

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<sup>18</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 53-54.

the latter instance, Eliot's appeal is explicitly not to the reader's visual memory but to their feelings. Indeed, while an appeal to visual memory alone might enable the reader to 'conjure up the image of a lovely woman', the reader has the narrator's word that 'she would not in the least resemble that distracting kitten-like maiden', any more than Edward Courbold's picture can do, notwithstanding that it painstakingly replicates the detailed account of Hetty's appearance contained in the text. The only circumstance in which Eliot can represent Hetty's beauty to the reader is if the reader has seen a lovely woman who had the same effect on them as Hetty has on those who see her. In that case, however, the image that the reader conjures up will be the image, not of Hetty as she in fact was, but of a quite different woman, the one who affected them as Hetty affects her beholders. Only that woman, whose outward appearance might in truth be only superficially like Hetty's, truly resembles the Hetty that Eliot describes. As Alison Byerly observes, the 'essential fact' of Hetty's appearance is 'her effect on people', and that cannot be represented by a purely visual description.<sup>20</sup>

Although Jeff Nunokawa suggests that Eliot's narrator's professed inability to describe Hetty other than by appealing to the reader's feelings is a consequence of the specifically sexual nature of her allure,<sup>21</sup> Randall Craig points out that it can be seen in the context of a 'general consensus' in *Adam Bede* that 'the deepest and most important feelings are the least capable of expression' in words;<sup>22</sup> thus Dinah Morris says to Mr Irwine that it is her 'besetment to forget where I am and everything about me, and lose myself in thoughts that I could give no account of, for I could neither make a beginning nor ending of them in words', while Adam

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<sup>20</sup> Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> See Jeff Nunokawa, 'Sexuality in the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deidre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 125-48 (pp. 140-41).

<sup>22</sup> Randall Craig, *Promising Language: Betrothal in Victorian Law and Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 174.

Bede tells the narrator that ‘there’s deep speritual things in religion. You can’t make much out wi’ talking about it, but you feel it’.<sup>23</sup> In the present context, however, what is pertinent is the similarity between George Eliot’s conception – that a fictional narrator’s depiction of a character may be said by that narrator to be inadequate to represent the character to the reader unless the reader has themself previously experienced an emotional response to a real person that is analogous to the fictional response of the narrator to the character depicted,<sup>24</sup> in which case the narrator expects the reader to see an image, not of the fictional character, but of the real person who inspired that emotional response – and the conception expressed by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* just a few months later. So marked is that similarity, indeed, that it seems unlikely to be coincidental: the most plausible conclusion is surely that Collins derived the idea from his reading of *Adam Bede*.

It is quite possible that there are further respects in which it could be demonstrated that *The Woman in White* was influenced by the phenomenally successful novel so recently published by Collins’s friend. It was noted in the Introduction, for example, that the transposition of the unreality of Gothic incident to the reality of modern life has long been regarded as one of the principal hallmarks of sensation fiction, and it might prove fruitful in the context of critical discussion of the relationship between sensationalism and realism to consider the extent to which what Henry James called the ‘thorough-going realism’ of *The Woman in White* was shaped by the realist manifesto in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*: there are suggestive parallels between James’s well-known pronouncement that

To Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors. [...] Instead of the

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<sup>23</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 82; 165.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Analogous’ is Eliot’s own word: she wrote in a review of Ruskin’s Edinburgh *Lectures on Art and Architecture* in 1854 that ‘The aim of Art, in depicting any object, is to produce in the mind analogous emotions to those produced by the object itself’ ([Marian Evans], ‘Ruskin’s Lectures’, *The Leader*, vol. 5, no. 220 (June 10 1854), pp. 545-46 (p. 546)).

terrors of “Udolpho”, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible. Mrs. Radcliffe’s mysteries were romances pure and simple; while those of Mr. Wilkie Collins were stern reality[,]”<sup>25</sup>

or Margaret Oliphant’s characterisation of Collins as a writer who thrills us by ‘tak[ing] in hand the common mechanisms of life’, producing his effects ‘by the simplest expedients of life’, ‘common human acts, performed by recognizable human beings’,<sup>26</sup> and George Eliot’s equally well-known claim that

[I]f I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be [...], I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking [...]. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.<sup>27</sup>

(Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Eliot’s claim to be as truthful ‘as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath’ might have influenced Walter Hartright’s account of his narrative methodology:

As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. [...] The story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect.)<sup>28</sup>

But that issue, like others that are only peripheral to the main argument of this thesis and have therefore not been given the fuller consideration that they undoubtedly deserve – such as the extent to which mesmerism is a driver of the plot of *Basil*, touched on in the Introduction, or the influence of William Hazlitt on G. H. Lewes’s aesthetic of fiction, briefly considered in chapter 4 above – will have to await investigation in the future.

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<sup>25</sup> [Henry James], ‘Miss Braddon’, *The Nation*, vol. 1, no. 19 (November 9 1865), pp. 593-94: *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> [Margaret Oliphant], ‘Sensation Novels’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 91, no. 559 (May 1862), pp. 564-84: *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 5.

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