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Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone: Reflections on a Golden Genre

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Whether E. A. Poe in the United States, E. Gaboriau in France or Collins himself in Great Britain is to be credited with the invention of the Sensation or Mystery Novel, a new genre was born in the second half of the 19th century — a genre which played truant from the start. Mainly because it cheated on the definition of canonical Literature and took the late romantic preoccupation with what could be called the far side of the soul seriously. Even though the emergence of these novels centering almost exclusively on murder and corruption can be roughly traced to one prolific decade from the 1860s to the 1870s, their metamorphosis into the later forms of the detective novel and even *Film Noir* in the 1940s took over three quarters of a century.

The shifting and shadowy territory of the soul comes under scrutiny at a time of great political and social turmoil in England and its Indian Empire.² At the heart of a double textual movement of hiding and revealing mysteries, there is violence and foul play. As critic Margaret Oliphant said at the time:

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² Ten years before the publication of *The Moonstone*, in 1858, the Cepoy Rebellion had been crushed at Lucknow by the British Army.

The horrors of our novels are crimes against life and property. The policeman is the Fate who stalks relentless, or flies with lightning steps after our favorite villain. The villain himself is a banker, and defrauds his customers; he is a lawyer and cheats his clients — if he is not a ruffian who kills his man. Or even, when a bolder hand than usual essays to lift the veil from the dark world of female crime, we give the sin itself a certain haze of decorum . . . Murder, conspiracy, robbery, fraud are the strong colours upon the national palette (Oliphant 168).

1 - Somebody Else

In Collins' *The Moonstone*, however, the process of detection is not to be attributed to one "policeman" but to a multiplicity of detective figures. Just like the archetypal villain whose exposure is constantly delayed, the detective comes in various guises. In the novel, both the hero and the criminal fit the category of aliens and are inextricable twins. Each one provisionally turns into somebody else. Even though Franklin Blake proves to be an "innocent" thief thanks to Ezra Jennings, the uncontrollable steps he took when sleepwalking in Rachel's bedroom label him as uncharted territory. In this sense, he also exhibits the dark side which was traditionally assumed by the arch-transgressor, his double-faced cousin Godfrey Ablewhite for instance. Under the rational explanation of an opium-induced attitude, he exposes a world of hidden motives lurking beneath a deceptive surface.

The treatment he undergoes with Jennings is curiously akin to Dr Freud's. It is still a little early to refer to psychoanalysis. Blake's ambiguous behavior however — which could be interpreted as a sexual violation of Rachel's femininity — blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, the self and the Other. For a few hours on the night of Miss Veringer's birthday, he is not himself and lets loose the dangerous, criminal side in himself. After all, he does steal the Diamond just like Ablewhite and, before him, their criminal ancestor, John Herncastle. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once said about *The Scarlet Letter*, the crimes of the forefathers will be visited upon the generations to come.

This seems to be the basic mechanism of the newly-born genre. Raw and ungovernable forces can stem at any time from anyone and spread through the communal circle. Michel Foucault goes as far as linking the rise of what he calls a "literature of criminality" to this 19th century revelation:

Corresponding to this, throughout the whole second half of the century there developed a "literature of criminality" . . . including miscellaneous news items (and, even more, popular newspapers) as well as detective novels and all the romanticized writings which developed around crime — the transformation of the criminal into a hero, perhaps, but, equally, the affirmation that ever-present criminality is a constant menace to the social body as a whole. The collective fear of crime, the obsession with this danger which seems to be an inseparable part of society itself, are thus perpetually inscribed in each individual consciousness (Foucault 10).

In *The Moonstone*, surfaces are elusive and deceptive. Like the Shivering Sand, each being is himself a riddle. As house servant Gabriel Betteredge often jokingly remarks, Blake constantly oscillates between a subjective and an objective view. Speaking of Colonel Herncastle's possible intent when sending over the Moonstone to his niece Rachel, he cannot decide on "vengeance" or unadulterated generosity: "This question has two sides An Objective side, and a Subjective side. Which are we to take?" (75)

The same questioning also defines the characters in Collins' work. They wear masks screening what they are or temporarily altering their true character. After the theft, Rachel momentarily turns into "properly speaking, . . . *not* Rachel, but Somebody Else" (215). She spurns Blake's irremediable duality and duplicity to embrace Ablewhite's apparent unity. But just like the process of narration, each character is a puzzle of conflicting manifest and hidden sides. He suddenly ceases to be a well-centered individual functioning as an independent authority and capable of solving mysteries. Just like the narrative, one turns into the very example of fragmentation, a figure with no definable center whose identity itself is a mystery eluding every solution.

Godfrey Ablewhite's literal and figurative masks on his deathbed are paradigmatic of the "monstrous delusion" (394) all the characters fall victims to. It looks like the only way out lies with the community taking charge of authority. The crime has to be exposed cooperatively in a multi-voiced text which can then restore a provisional order in the community.

2 - Hide and Seek

Thirteen different independent narratives make up this "communal" text. Franklin Blake's sleepwalking episode is the core of it: he is both therefore — and unknowingly — the object and the subject of inquiry. Since there is no single

elucidating intelligence at the center of the book, each narrator in charge of reporting sections of the whole story can never control the entire process of detection. This absence of a single omniscient point of view results in an interesting fusion between the narrator and the investigator, and consequently modifies the early formula of detective novels. Unlike Detective Dupin in Poe's "The Purloined Letter" for instance, the hero has little to do with the traditional private eye. He is not even a private "I" encompassing and supervising the whole process of detection. The wrongdoer is only one of the seekers and the classic duality between the story of the crime and the story of the quest is here shattered into a multiplicity of discordant facets of the same textual reality. The various speeches reflect on each other constantly rewriting a different version of truth.

Sergeant Cuff and Superintendent Seegrave's work happens to be a parody of detection. None ever comes close to exposing the truth. As Cuff admits in his final report: "I might have tried to find the right reading of this riddle, and tried in vain..." (507) They both considerably interacted with the order of the comfortably domestic world Lady Verinder desperately tried to protect. In other words, instead of introducing order, the professional detectives interfere with the community's cohesion and bring about social dissolution. Because he is morally innocent, Franklin only is endowed with the right to display the depths of the community. Exposing himself, he also exposes the secrets of others, mainly Rosanna's, Rachel's and Ezra's. So even if he is also plagued with a limited vision and misreads certain hints such as Rosanna's familiarity, his own testimony when added to the others' provides a context from which to comprehend circumstances more fully.

This multiple-narrative method emphasizes the subjectivity of story-telling by bringing to the fore individual perspectives on the crime. What Miss Clack sees and misconstrues for example highlights the fictionalizing inherent in this process of interpretation. As Blake notes, her version of the facts has an "unquestionable value as an instrument for the exhibition of Miss Clack's character" (236). She alone is responsible for her own vision of the facts and therefore can only produce a fragmentary discourse.

The novel being structured as a quest for solution, this exercise in the art of fragmentation is a good demonstration of Collins' argument for a flexibility of vision. He explores the process of interpretation as a unique master mind such as Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes would do. As a consequence, he turns the reader into a voyeur and a witness of the characters' misconstructions. Just like

Blake who compiles and edits the different narratives, the reader has to reconstruct the puzzle of the lost story. But language is unreliable as Doctor Candy's delirium shows. Seeing through it and penetrating misleading surfaces also entail turning oneself into an object of public scrutiny. As Betteredge suggests: "In this matter of the Moonstone the plan is, not to present reports, but to produce witnesses" (233). In other terms, Blake's suppressed dream must become a public spectacle for the crime to be solved and order reinstated. The fragmented text operates also as an image of a self dependent on the discourse of society and constituted as a combination of selves. The public impinges on the private here. One never completely forgets and as Blake tells Rachel, "We are naturally suspicious of what we don't know" (410), thus implying that the inquiry into the theft is also an inquiry into the depths of the self. For the self is alien and Blake can only recognize and recover parts of it by snatches. When searching the changing Shivering Sand for a clue, he exhumes more than hidden bits of the intrigue:

I took it up from the sand and looked for the mark.
I found the mark and read —
MY OWN NAME.
... I had discovered Myself as the Thief (359).

His name embroidered on the nightgown is another one of these fragments making up the puzzle of his own obscure personality. Neither he nor the community can tell the whole story for no one knows who stole the diamond, why it was stolen or how it was done. Everyone, like Doctor Candy, seems to have lost the faculty of thinking connectedly and since the articulation between the public and the private I has not been made yet, no "complete intelligible statement" ¹ can be produced. Each individual has first to acknowledge himself as a criminal, a victim and an investigator at once. This is precisely what Sherlock Holmes does in Conan Doyle's *The Man with the Twisted Lip*. He discovers that the victim of a kidnapping is also the perpetrator of the crime by becoming more a master of disguise than the kidnapper. In the same way, some of Collins' characters partly tackle the problem of the frightening Unkown Blake was telling Rachel about, by recognizing that the problem of the "Dangerous Individual" is inscribed in every human consciousness.

¹ As Jennings says on page 424 about his own rephrasing of Candy's desultory words.

3 - To Think Connectedly

The alleged waning and waxing of the yellow stone are emblematic of the sudden twists and turns of the plot. Each particular speech functions as a facet of a reflecting prism. The whole structure of the overwhole prose narrative is founded on the obstinate effort to close a logico-temporal gap and to patch together an array of "blank space[s] on the paper" (424). In the story, the distance between the crime and its solution is so great that it takes an outsider, a doctor and a writer, to make connections — social ones included — and to synthesize clues. Just like the whole genre, Collins' work is very much based on an *inscription* of knowledge.

In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, the criminal investigation also classically fills a gap in time. But even though there is the same reenacting of the original trauma in the denouement, there is only one discourse inscribing the process of detection. Marlowe tells Carmen Sternwood's story without resorting to any external explanatory writing. He fulfills his private eye's duties in this bourgeois family while remaining all the while very much aware of his own disruptive power. In his 1946 film adaptation, Howard Hawks solves the problem of interpretation of the space of mystery by playing on shadows and silhouettes. In his claustrophobic composition, the settings ooze psychological and physical violence. The jutting outlines of guns projected onto walls echo verbal violence. In the first scenes of this famed *Film Noir*, decaying General Sternwood compares the smell of his orchid greenhouse to "the rotten sweetness of corruption." The germs of disorder are already within. In Collins' novel, Blake remarks on social degradation by using the same poison metaphor:

When I came here from London with that horrible Diamond . . . I don't believe there was a happier household in England than this. Look at the household now! Scattered, disunited — the very air of the place poisoned with mystery and suspicion! (223)

The tactic of false clues he uses — such as the descriptive passages like the Shivering Sands' or the Rosanna Spearman episode — prevents premature disclosure in the interest of suspense. They are so many "dead" reflections which never link up with the main frame of the intrigue, loose motifs in what Jennings calls "the ravelled skein" (438). Their main function simply seems to be to postpone the unexpected revelation of the mystery reached through Doctor Candy's broken discourse. The old man's delirious ejaculations and Jennings' painstaking

deciphering are paradigmatic of these devices of retardation. The plot is deliberately complex and desultory. Few fragments fit to perfection even though Jennings, the model reader and detective, claims he has "penetrated through the obstacle of the disconnected expression, to the thought which was underlying it connectedly all the time" (437). Here shimmers again the core of the Moonstone, the pristine reflection, "the original language and the interpretation of it" (437) everyone is looking for. Among these digressions, only the connecting thought is important. It alone can assuage the "detective fever" and set all these reflecting fragments in moral and aesthetic order. It is ironical that it should be the outcast son of the Empire, half British and half Indian, who retrieves the lost snatches of the story.

Thanks to his synthetic mind and because opium and his own poor condition forced him to acknowledge the dark sides of his personality, the domestic plot eventually achieves circularity. The courtship subplot between Blake and Rachel meets a happy ending, and the diamond of the mainstream story returns to its original resting place. Jennings' dialectical view of events — from within outwards — helps reconstruct Candy's memory and anticipates the methods of psychoanalysis. He brings together "fragments of sentences" (436) by inducing the dreamers to make public their inmost acts and thoughts. Every narrator is put to the test of this "fill-in-the-blanks exercise." But Franklin Blake seems to be the only one who understands the necessity "to revive [his] recollection of everything that happened in the house, on the evening of Miss Verinder's birthday" (414). All peripheral, social, political and framing plots come together when the hero reaches what Freud later called "anamnestic knowledge" (Freud 16). When Sergeant Cuff did not acknowledge that the agencies of repression were already within, Blake accepted the essential idea that these forces could be operating within his own plural personality. He consequently rereads and reenacts Jennings' model speech, a synthesized text in miniature which is what any detective novel is all about: what do you say to the art of detection now that the dream has come true? ¹

Still, at the core of this masterly exercise in detection and textual reconstitution, there remains the novel's fundamental questions: who is Jennings, besides a sacrificial character, a male pariah mirroring Rosanna's function in the text? Where does he come from? Why, if he is himself a model reader just like the ideal one often called upon in the book, isn't his own story told? All these

¹ In Jennings' reconstitution of Candy's wanderings, the old doctor actually says: "What do you say to the art of medicine now?" (438)

question-marks link up with the overall structure of the work and, beyond, with the political context in England and India towards the end of the 19th century. As a victim of British colonialism, Jennings' character introduces into the text another type of "reflection" — a criticism of English political exploitation disguised behind the veil of missionary zeal. The play on reflections is endless.



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