

## Chapter 6: Overview and Conclusion

By mid nineteenth century there had grown a general belief in the usefulness of applied science such that it was seen to have a social function and deserve its growing prestige and authority. Such a perception perhaps accounts for *All the Year Round*'s statement of 1862:

There *were* ages when the mind of civilization expressed itself through art. That time is over, and the man who would be essentially a man of the day must ally himself with the mode of expression belonging to the day. Just now, he had better on the whole hang on to the tender of the locomotive than occupy the best seat in the chariot of fancy. ("Small Beer" 584 )

Collins' career coincided with the shift in prestige and authority from the arts to the sciences and he addressed the situation by blending fiction and fact in an adaptation both artistic and scientific. The union worked, not simply by saturating the content of the novels with technological developments or by merely using scientific comparisons as a fresh source of imagery, amusing stories engaged with fundamental issues. For instance, the novels contain little direct comment on the evolutionary hypothesis<sup>1</sup>, but they do address the broad issue of the nature of the relationship between scientific and religious truth. Consistently Collins represents truth as apprehended from two extremes, the factual, practical mode of science where reason and logic dominate and the insightful mode of art where interpretations are made through cultural associations and images. Collins' stories utilise both modes. We find the artist moving to integrate the physical functions of the body and brain into his fiction and at the same time urging physiologists to remember the mind's moral dimension when dealing with the body.

Though the fiction is often critical of religious practice and politics,

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<sup>1</sup> As noted above, Betteridge (in *The Moonstone*) and Benjamin (in *The Law and the Lady*) are disapproving of "new ideas" in general so that their uninformed remarks on evolution become merely part of a representation of conservatism in older people. In *Heart and Science* Teresa's disparaging remarks are directed against the inconsistency of evolutionists, not the theory directly.

there is no challenge made to Christian faith. Kirk Beetz in describing Collins' early career and his association with *The Leader* has reported how Collins, in the 1850s, found the *Leader's* frivolous attitude to religion breaching his personal religious principles. In the 1880s *Heart and Science* still speaks of "faith" (not church) in such a way that it is sometimes hard to distinguish religious faith from the faith the reader is expected to have in Collins' own writing. This is understandable because the question posed about Biblical narratives applied also to literary works in general: when does an author become an authority? At what stage does an author's own belief become sufficient justification for a reader's trust? Beetz' article points to Collins' literary integrity that drives him to make every detail in his novels exact and precisely right. Throughout this thesis I too have stressed Collins' accuracy and realism. But his integrity rests primarily in the creative act, in what the author's imagination draws of what he has not actually seen or experienced.

His recognition of sign as "language" is significant not only because it marks a departure from conventional attitudes and towards an informed understanding of the potential of deaf people but also because it touches on speculation about the nature and origins of language and impinges on evolutionary debates, just coming into prominence. Collins' depiction of Madonna indicates that spirituality is *not* a function of speech (or any form of language). Language may be the product of human inventiveness; but spirituality, he shows, is associated with a private, inner life and its source is ineffable.

Collins does not avoid moral issues (he makes this point in the preface to *Basil* ) but he does demonstrate the need for reassessment in the light of new knowledge emerging through the social and psychological sciences. He moves away from the traditional division of mind, body and spirit and

the picturing of idealised human nature governed by moral training. Instead he seeks explanation of behaviour, drawing on psychophysics, the theory of functionally dependent relations between physical and psychological worlds. So, for example, Lucilla Finch is shown “true” to *her* nature, in physical circumstances beyond her control, making the most of her potential through a series of adaptations that signal her practical intelligence.

In Collins’ day Herbert Spencer propounded the theory that organisms develop by evolution the tendency to grow from confusion to order (Haley 83-85) and was promoting the idea that an individual’s general ability allowed the development of specific abilities. Collins’ characterisations are consistent with this theory. Though both Madonna and Lucilla are specifically restricted physically, neither is mentally impaired. Their capacity to adapt is the measure of their intelligence which is a property of the mind, capable of solving problems and of creative thinking. Consistent with this view of intelligence, Collins’ many references to children’s education stress the need to encourage individuality. He shows that children need a wealth of experiences to develop their general ability and exercise their intelligence. And in all Collins’ representations it is not a difference in knowledge that separates the artist and the scientist; it is a difference in the all-roundedness that is an indicator of intelligence. This is clearly set forth through Zoe Gallilee whose chorus, “ ‘I don’t know,’ ” belies her intelligent curiosity.

Lucilla Finch’s portraiture shows that the power of the imagination can outstrip the ability to see. Unsuccessful scientists like Benjulia and Mrs Gallilee lack flexibility in thinking because they lack imagination. Their knowledge is narrowly contained and so focussed that they do not see wider possibilities. They are preoccupied with dissecting and, like the

doctor at Blyth's picture showing, see only scraps of detail. Specialists, Collins shows, isolate phenomena, outside normal relations, for study and want amplitude and wholeness of vision. Physiology is inadequate to describe individual variations in behaviour or explain different temperaments. So, in *Heart and Science* specialisation is indicted by being made analogous with Benjulia's solitary life and anti-social indifference. In *Hide and Seek* in the case of critics, specialisation is censured by their use of pretentious language, empty of meaning. And Collins' own preference for "plain" language may be seen as a stylistic rejection of specialisation in the literary world while frequent references to the work of Raphael express the value of being different. Artists, like Blyth and Robert Graywell, both unconventional, are shown to be free and generous. They don't put their trust in property, worry over other people's opinions of them or seek to impress. Above all they are shown to have integrated personalities and to be "true" to themselves and their art. They are innocents who, with the ill and the handicapped, are shown to be individually beautiful.<sup>2</sup> These are the heroes of Collins' fiction: private individuals with kind hearts, non-judgmental, modest people who are self-reliant and self-fulfilled, who daily cope with vicissitude. In subtle ways too the freedom of art is approved. For example, Carmina Graywell, with a taste for poetry, prefers a museum with an eclectic mix of contents to one with a catalogue of classified items. Her preference is used to guide readers to value variety over regularity while the excess clutter of fashionable ornaments at Fairfield Gardens signals Mrs Gallilee's want of taste and may be critical of Victorian taste more generally. Ovid Vere is Collins' representation of a successful scientist who blends medical

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<sup>2</sup> Cray suggests that modifying the concept of beauty is the artist's means of shifting social power (11) in a time of mass production (13). In *Hide and Seek* Blyth's artistic eye sees beauty in a mute foundling and transforms her into beloved daughter.

expertise with open-mindedness and strikes the “right” balance between professional ambition and personal modesty and between intellectual discipline and emotional spontaneity. Not sentiment but sympathy bonds him to his fellow man.

Marshall has observed that Collins’ “villains” tend to be those characters with an absolute sense of their own authority (119). His observation holds true even for minor characters like Jubber, Yallop, Joanna Grice, and Reverend Finch. In *Heart and Science* the villains are those scientists who are out of step with their consciences and claim for themselves ultimate knowledge and absolute freedom to act without moral parameters. In the business world, Thorpe is shown to confuse authority and morality. In literature Collins himself avoids a charge of authoritarianism through his narrative practice. Although the author, singly, has total power to control the mystery, in the thought-provoking aspects of even a mystery, by using various points of view, sometimes employing different narrators, offering alternatives and inconclusive and open endings the author finds a way of seemingly reducing authorial control. The author’s skill there is in supplying the “data” from which general truths may be inferred. This non-dictatorial method appears to approximate the detachment of science.

Sharing control invites readers to call upon their personal experience in making decisions in areas like causality and moral judgment. Nevertheless, Collins’ control still operates as an *influence* exerted by the weight of evidence assembled--albeit imaginatively arranged to make the best case for the emotional argument he is promoting. Through this method he convinces by reason *and* touches the conscience. Collins’ fiction is double-edged in more ways than this: his empathy with unorthodox characters is clear and their difference is used to question the

value of uniformity in Nature; yet they feature in plots that, overall, are orderly and tightly structured.<sup>3</sup> The result is to suggest that while in the material world artist and scientist probe for truth through the senses and intellect, they continue to operate under nature's mysterious controlling power.

The novels I have selected to analyse deal, characteristically, with medical science: not much with chemistry or surgical procedures but with the relationship between medicine and human happiness. That is, Collins' portraits are concerned with the psychological and physical forces that affect identity and a person's sense of fellowship and well-being. His notes clearly state this purpose and imply support for the usefulness of medical practice, that branch of science where discovery is fitted to human need. But his support for scientific advances is not unqualified. Collins shares with Ruskin and Emerson the image of the steam whistle to suggest modern society's bias towards technology and away from the natural and the beautiful (Levine 122, Emerson 45). Moderation is introduced partly through the depiction of Baregrove Square (in *Hide and Seek*) and the Square adjacent to Fairfield Gardens (in *Heart and Science*). These not only reflect the historical development of the urban milieu. They also represent vestiges of the past when people lived closer to Nature. It could be argued that the rural setting of *Poor Miss Finch* serves a similar end. The presence of these features questions society's arguments heralding science as a panacea for present troubles and steers thinking Victorians to ask: Is science "taming" nature? Is mankind any happier? Or is mankind being diminished? Where will development end? Is nothing beyond man's inventive capacities? These sorts of questions concerning mankind's

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<sup>3</sup> For example, what is hidden is rediscovered; selfhood is lost and restored. *No Name* is a prime example to illustrate the point: chances abound; yet orderliness is preserved--from inherited likenesses down to the mathematical exactitude of Lecount's payment.

control of nature underlie episodes as different as Blyth's decision not to force Madonna into articulate speech and Benjulia's use of Regent's Park Zoo.

Carpenter argued that we accept laws that *seem* universal because we have no other explanation. That is, we *believe* what fits within our *conception* of nature. Our trust relies on "unconscious co-ordination of the whole aggregate of our experiences--not on the conclusiveness of any one train of Reasoning, but on the convergence of all our lines of thought towards this one centre" (Carpenter, "Presidential Address" 423). In art the convergence of parallel lines (perspective) is the basis for a realistic representation of a three dimensional object on a flat surface. In writing, too, depth is achieved as points of view converge or overlap. Miss Minerva, for instance, is shown to readers variously through the eyes of the Gallilees (mistress, master and children), their servants and Carmina. Teresa and Ovid look twice and see her differently each time. And readers are given a self-portrait that fluctuates with the efforts she makes. Multiple "lines of perspective" accumulate to encourage the reader's trust in Collins' portraiture.

*Heart and Science* demonstrates that physiological research cannot be carried out by the *methods* that apply to inorganic science. Yet sensation was an area of psychology that was considered open to experiment. Here sensory processes could be studied in relation to measurable physical stimuli, in efforts to explore the physiological processes of the brain and so determine the nature of the connection, if any, between body and mind. Collins concentrates his attention in this area. Furthermore, Collins' novels with heroines of reduced sensory perception confirm the biologists' *idea* of organism. As characters *adapt* in face of handicap they demonstrate the general biological principle of organic wholeness: that every living cell

or tissue is called upon to act in the interest of the whole (Burden-Sanderson 283). When George Eliot considered the individual as part of the state, Collins looked at specific functions as part of the whole body. The same principle of organic integration is expressed as one sense organ substitutes for another that is lost and demonstrates a plasticity of brain function. When medical science fails to cure Madonna's deafness she adapts by drawing on another sense to communicate. Such conversion was consistent with the theory of physical science: in 1842 Grove's popular *Correlation of Physical Forces* "foresaw an age in which mankind would go beyond his newfound abilities to convert the common forces of nature into one another and invent entirely fresh modes of conversion" (Basalla et al. 89).

Novelist, physicist and chemist alike were probing questions concerned with intellectual activity -- "work" in physical terms. For instance, how much nutrition/energy is required for mental "work"? Where are the limits before exhaustion occurs? (Roscoe 192). Partial catalepsy, memory loss, collapse and madness are all represented in *Heart and Science* as characters pass their limits of physical and emotional endurance. Carmina's "case" well reflects the influence of weariness and recuperation as modifiers of psychological reactions. Similarly, when Nugent explains to Madam Pratolungo (*Finch* 286) how he passed the limit of his resistance to emotional strain and sank into shameless betrayal of his twin, his explanation reads like a case study from a psychology text book.<sup>4</sup> Such examples illustrate the mind-body connection which scientists, and Collins, found so mysterious and locate what are traditionally elements of fiction (conflicting uncertainties and choices) within the *inner* life of a

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<sup>4</sup> Combe had described passion as the highest degree of activity of any faculty (Shuttleworth "Psychological Definition" 137) and, from 1841, William Acton had been describing desire as a dangerous force (Guy 473).

fictitious individual whom readers “know” from his/her psychological profile, not from outward form. Such a portraiture invites self-scrutiny and indicates that Collins is not promoting art “for Art’s sake.” (Benjulia is reduced by his pursuit of Knowledge for Knowledge’s sake.) Collins shows art engaged with life. It is a measure of his even-handedness that he makes the flawed character, Nugent Dubourg, a spokesman for art.

Nugent finds no space big enough for his paintings (*Finch* 154). That statement is less expressive of his vanity than of the infinity of Nature that is his subject. And Nugent declares his mission: to reconcile Humanity and Nature (149). He describes himself as “the coming man” in landscape painting (149) and as the spokesman for the new age declares:

‘I prefer to trust to my intellectual perception of beauty, rather than to mere laborious transcripts from Nature. In certain moods of mine (speaking as an artist) nature puts me out.’

He sees his role neither as copyist nor decorator of creation<sup>5</sup> but declares that Nature is in sympathy with man and is adaptable to the spiritual needs of mankind (149). The artist’s function is to recognise this potential and blend the material and the spiritual in a shared agreement.<sup>6</sup> The novels promote the artist’s vision of harmony and make it appear that twin sources of knowledge co-exist and are necessary to inform the “mind” of civilization and draw people together.

Collins’ approach, basically, is interrogative. He works from the specific to the general and is concerned with rarity and apparent

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<sup>5</sup> Nugent quotes Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), an artist friend of William Collins. The reference, however, is more than a tribute to a family friend. Fuseli painted mostly literary subjects, subjects caught at moments of intense emotion. There is a fairytale, dreamlike or macabre element of fantasy in his work (e.g. “The Nightmare”) just as there is about *Poor Miss Finch* and especially about Nugent’s death.

Fuseli influenced Blake, a visionary, who rephrased Fuseli’s “Nature puts me out” as “I do not notice that which I see with mortal eyes.” Nor does Collins’ spokesman limit himself to what is optically available.

<sup>6</sup> It is also through Nugent that Collins speaks out against those who misinterpret literary works, like Reverend Finch (132) or, like Madam Pratulungo, fail to recognise innovation as a blessing of the imagination (142).

randomness -- unlike the trend to predict outcomes in terms of probabilities based on statistical evidence and expressed in mathematical language where the likelihood of an event occurring is measured and expressed as a ratio of the number of cases against the number of possible occurrences. Tyndall used the doctrine of Conservation of Energy to link nature and fate to "bring vital as well as physical phenomena under the dominion of that law of causal connection, which so far as the human understanding has yet pierced, asserts itself everywhere in nature" (Tyndall, "Presidential Address" 462). Collins admits chance, luck, Providence, fate, a person's own consciousness as not logically governed. After all, the very concept of "probability" is abstract and theoretical and is derived intuitively. It, too, has its genesis in apparent randomness and rarities. Both "chance" and "risk" are associated in the gambler's "hazard" and the predictive function of probability can be measured only in terms of practical consequences. Collins' novels play in the margin where a possibility exists so that the twists in a plot seem not designed to foster credulity but to admit the possibility. And the possibilities Collins presents do not necessarily predict what is likely to occur. They are theoretical models made to challenge independent thought on issues of current concern.

As an artist he describes uniqueness--of person and event--and looks for causes beyond the immediate antecedent event. His use of chance occurrence becomes a form of argument against reading consecutive connection as necessarily causal and against accepting conjecture and theory as certain knowledge of general principles. The admission of ignorance is his *reasonable* response to mystery and accepts the uncertainty that a chance occurrence may be mere fact or evidence of design.

By “playing with possible realities” Collins shows that reality is complex and different from familiarity, especially when the familiar is an impractical expression of wishful thinking. And since perception is necessarily a personal and subjective act, who is to say where the boundaries lie that separate the real exception from the idealised “norm”? A century after the fairytale of Miss Finch was written, in 1974, the experimental psychologist, R.L. Gregory, introducing his final chapter in *Concepts and Mechanics of Perception*, wrote:

This paper is designed to have a high co-efficient of fiction. This should not be taken to mean that it will necessarily be false; but rather that it will play with possible realities. It will be argued that playing with possible realities is the essence of intelligence. (630)

Collins can make even a fantasy a springboard for scientific discussion. His lively intelligence interprets what he sees of the variable, unpredictable, deceptive experiences of a shifting world to isolate for inspection issues seen from a different angle and framed in a fiction that is both entertaining and useful.

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Collins’ work preserved two traditions: one that saw science as a source of entertainment and a second that expected literature to teach while it entertained. What was different about Collins’ writing was that the science was no longer spectacle but was chiefly concerned with unseen forces in nature and especially the inner life of man and his consciousness. And the teaching, though it retained a moral outlook, operated from different premises, and was directed to sociological goals.

Collins’ scientific preoccupations were in the medical/psychological field and in perception, and I have pointed out that his understanding in these areas was up to date. Though I have used many comparisons to suggest the extent of Collins’ knowledge, I have proven few sources. But I

have noted that, as a journalist, Collins had the peculiar opportunity to access summaries of the latest discoveries and to consult expert opinion. His consistent accuracy would seem improbable without the research that he claimed to have done. For example, the connection between blindness and self-identity in *Poor Miss Finch* seems to have been meticulously well researched. Physical science (like the conversion theory, mentioned above in this chapter) seems merely to have been generally known and “absorbed” (as Levine suggests was the case with Dickens over Darwinian issues). I am persuaded that Collins relied mostly on secondary sources, the periodicals and a “network” of contacts, knowledgeable in their fields and saw himself as a systematic observer and recorder of human nature.

It is interesting also how Collins used an acknowledged source. In the case of Kitto his method appears to be Baconian: presenting facts ratified by experience (though not always Kitto’s). However, Collins’ narrative is not built, in empirical tradition, on a mass of evidence, but features a single “case study” that models the general position. As his physicist contemporary would do, Collins invites readers to test the theoretical model to reach a rational conclusion.

*The Popular Science Monthly*, reported, “The scientific man must be fertile in imagination, but stern in his rejection of views that cannot be adjusted to facts” (“Mental Picturing” 621). Collins, too, is stern in rejection of views that cannot be adjusted to facts and is alert to discrepancies, especially between conventional opinions of doubtful relevance in the changed circumstances of Victorian life.

His fertile imagination leads him to experiment with literary practices so that, while it is true that, taken separately, there is little that is original in Collins’ method, collectively his package is distinguished. His achievement was in combination, combining the known with novelty so

that he became a trend-setter. In a nice inversion of earlier scientific and literary principles, the artist was tending towards naturalistic representation rather than constructed ideals while men of science were acknowledging the need for imagination to theorise and model in the unseen world of “pure” science.

Though there is a detectable bias towards art, nevertheless, generally, there is evidence of Collins’ even-handed representation of issues to show that reason and imagination are complementary tools of the mind. This is especially so with regard to knowledge where material and metaphysical sources co-exist, the one acting to counterbalance the other. Collins could agree with Tyndall that “truth is often of a dual character, taking the form of a magnet with two poles” (Tyndall, “Scope and Limit”). Magnets can repel, as Tyndall points out. But opposite poles have the power to attract. Collins approaches “truth” through contrasts: of characters, ideas, and forms, synthesising mystery and controversy, humour and excitement, feeling and knowledge, conviction and speculation. His novels become compounds of extremities, “induced” to fall into line to increase their “magnetic” power.

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