Collins's 'detective business': *The Moonstone* as a Detective Novel

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"We shall have more detective business on our hands, sir, before the Moonstone is many months older" (182).

Today Sergeant Cuff's prophecy has gained new connotations for Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) gave a vital impetus to literary 'detective business'. Inspired by Collins' reading of the account of a late Eighteenth century case in Maurice Mejan's *Recueil des causes célèbres* (1808), which he discovered on a Paris bookstall in 1856, the novel single-handedly inaugurated a new genre. Indeed, T. S. Eliot's influential comment on *The Moonstone* indicates the genre generating capacity of Collins's novel: 'The Moonstone is the first and greatest of English detective novels... In detective fiction England probably excels other countries; but in a genre invented by Collins and not by Poe' (136-37). If Collins developed a way of sustaining the reader's interest in his principle action sequence involving the theft of the Moonstone; he simultaneously made detection a pretext for the survey of Victorian bourgeois life. In this paper I intend to examine the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic impulses that are present in Collins's self-reflexive detective discourse; the primary sites of contention being bourgeois domesticity and imperialism. I also hope to take into account the multiple strategies of containment that Collins as a 'literary detective' deployed in an attempt create a 'knowable universe' that could be 'interpreted by human reason' (Grella, 47). This knowable universe required generation of new disciplines — medical and criminal sciences — along with a general shift from detective to detection, observation to gaze. I hope to show that this shift gave birth to a
surveillance society and a conservatism which still saturates the genre of detective fiction.

Although Collins's present-day readers take the status of *The Moonstone* as detective fiction for granted, the novel also has strong generic links with the sensation novels of the 1860s and with gothic fiction. Winifred Hughes points out that in 'an age of preoccupation with rationality and with explanations, both social and psychological, the sensation novel helped to keep alive an alternative set of values: the idea of mystery, of the imponderables of human existence' (13). *The Moonstone* retains many traits of a sensation novel such as the emphasis on the 'exotic', 'wild' and irrational elements such as somnambulism. The Indians' ability to envision future using an ink-like substance evokes much interest and confirms the existence of realities beyond rational explications. Still readers cannot ignore the investment made in the step-by-step process of rational inquiry which was to become a hallmark of Conan Doyle's detective fiction.

Undeniably like a stereotypical detective story, Collins's novel is preoccupied with closing the logico-temporal gap that separates the theft of the Moonstone from the past that set it into motion. It is the task of the extraordinary detective to analyze and thereby rationalize things which evoke bewilderment and confusion. Sergeant Cuff, who is called to unravel the mystery of the Moonstone, encounters effects without apparent causes and events whose chronology has become jumbled. He immediately sets out to separate the significant clues from the insignificant one. The smear of Rachel's Verinder's door is not merely a 'trifle', and it is important to note that the varnish dries after twelve hours. In fact in detective fiction there are no banal details: as Sergeant Cuff points out, 'in all my experience along the dirtiest ways of this dirty world, I have never met with such a thing as a trifle yet (107). Even the digressive elements or what Boris Tomashevsky refers to as 'free motifs' are not 'trifles' (qtd in Porter 31). Parallel intrigues and love-motifs (including Rachel's and Rosanna's love for Blake); narrators with idiosyncrasies (Bettredge and Clack), characters who misinterpret the evidence (Sergeant Seegrave), and false suspects (Rosanna, Rachel) generate the Barthean pleasure of text.
It seems then that Collins invented a form of detective fiction which draws attention towards fragile surfaces or clues rather than the truth behind the ambiguous appearances. Still, the figure of the detective to an extent retained the ability to penetrate these surfaces and apprehend a particular reality. The detective didn't merely have the ability to reinstate 'the univocal links between signifiers and signifieds' (Moretti 146) but also capability to investigate the circulating discourses of 'truth'. Ezra Jennings indicates the massive reconstruction that is involved in the production of a particular 'regime of truth' (Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge*, 113): 'it is all confusion to begin with; but it may be all brought into order and shape, if you can only find the right way' (370). At one level Sergeant Cuff is emblematic of such a detective: 'I read the name that he had written. It was Godfrey Ablewhite'. However at the discursive level, it was Collins who retained the ability to demystify ideologies.

Indeed Collins's self-reflexivity offers him the status of a literary detective. He is able to comment successfully upon the production, circulation, and distribution of discourses — including his own. *The Moonstone*, which comprises a family paper, the written narratives of seven characters, and written 'statements', is partly a novel about writing. Besides Bettredge and Miss Clack, it is Collins who draws attention of the 'gentle reader' to the art of writing (39). Franklin Blake's directive that all characters should 'write the story of the Moonstone in turn — as far as [their] own personal experience extends, and no further' is linked to the desire to reveal the 'facts' or truth of the Moonstone case (18). But Collins contests all simplistic understandings of the relationship between 'writing' and 'truth'. 'Truth' is linked to systems of power, which produce and sustain it. Hence, any act of 'writing' is marked by three fold specificity — specific class position, conditions of life and work, and specificity of politics or ideological beliefs. Betteredge's comment highlights this process of mediation: 'I wonder whether the gentlemen who make a business and a living out of writing books, ever find their own selves getting in the way of their subjects, like me' (23). Further Miss Clack's narrative offers an insight into the gap between discursive 'truth' and 'reality'. When Miss Clack asks if she may, in writing her story, 'avail . . . herself of the light which later discoveries have thrown on the mystery', Franklin Blake 'is sorry to disappoint' her (197). She is
asked to narrate the past without taking into account the present. The writers are asked to speculate on truth and to comment on reality as they once knew it, even though it may have since been proved to be no reality at all.

Works cited


