特別寄稿：ウィルキー・コリンズ生誕200年

Wilkie Collins and 'The critic in The Times'

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Among the nearly three thousand five hundred surviving items of correspondence penned by Wilkie Collins, over half-a-million words in total, I have been able to locate only a couple of brief, impersonal references in passing to the work of the Scottish journalist E.S. Dallas (1827-79).[1] The initial occasion occurs in the first paragraph of a three-page letter to the publisher Edward Marston dated 31 October 1860, where, about to leave town for a few days, the author urges: 'If any fresh impression of The Woman in White is likely to be wanted immediately, stop the press till I come back. The critic in The Times is (between ourselves) right about the mistake in time.' (Baker et al., eds., [0381]). On the previous day, a lengthy review of the novel had appeared in London's most influential newspaper, 'cordially lauding a book in which at the same time we discover serious faults' ([Dallas], 'The Woman in White', p. 6c). Famously, the notice had concluded with a meticulous arithmetical demonstration that the novelist was 'a whole fortnight out of his reckoning' regarding the date on which Laura left Blackwater Park (*ibid.*).[2]

Given the overlaps between the metropolitan circles in which the two writers moved, this almost total absence of reference is rather surprising. A couple of later works by Collins were also evaluated by Dallas in *The Times* without apparent recognition,[3] although other major novelists such as Eliot, Trollope and Dickens were clearly aware when the Scots critic was responsible for their reviews there.[4] The two writers had quite a few acquaintances in

common, whether artists such as Leech, Frith and Millais, or journalists like Edward Pigott, W.H. Russell, George Sala, and Shirley Brooks, and both were members of the Garrick Club at the same time. Like Collins, Dallas was familiar not only with the London theatre through his wife, the well-known Shakespearean actress Isabella Glyn, but also with the literary scene in Paris where he twice served as a newspaper correspondent.[5] The two seem to have been even closer to a personal encounter during the 1870s when both briefly employed the enigmatic Polish émigré Stefan Poles as agent.[6] The purpose of this article is to suggest that, despite Collins's apparent lack of acknowledgment of the fact, the published opinions of '[t]he critic in The Times' were significant in supporting not only Wilkie's own individual literary standing but also that of sensation fiction as a genre.

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As has been shown in detail elsewhere,[7] in the early 1860s the dominant critical response to the growing popularity of the novels of Collins, Braddon, Wood et al. was to treat them as a dangerous intrusion of proletarian *mores* into bourgeois society, the literature of the kitchen finding its way surreptitiously into the drawing-room, an infection transmitted from slum to mansion. In formal terms, this meant strictly maintaining a cultural hierarchy between the narrative of character and manners based on empathy (the literary novel) and the narrative of plot based on mystery and suspense (the sensational novel). The only variation in approach was that in tone between social derision and moral outrage. E.S. Dallas's role was to offer a thoroughgoing deconstruction of this position, performed through two different media and as two distinct arguments. As regards the where, the Scots journalist not only put forward practical demonstrations through perceptive reviews in the columns of *The Times* of new novels both singly and in groups, but also theoretical discussions of the underlying issues, initially in his series of articles on 'Popular Literature' in the monthly *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1859),[8] and later in 'The Ethical Current', the final chapter of his monograph on the foundations of criticism, *The Gay Science* (1866).[9]

Concerning the what: Dallas first insisted that literary form should be analysed alongside publishing format, with the material and ideological constraints of the circulating library system recognized as well of those of the market for cheap periodicals; and second, he argued that the difference between novels of character and plot needed to be understood not only via the sociology of class but also as reflecting the philosophical and historical distinction between human beings seen as capable of dictating circumstances and shaping them to their will, or as being moulded and ruled by them. As Dallas came to recognize, a key characteristic of modernity, as evidenced by the thought of Darwin, Marx and later Freud, is its tendency to give much greater emphasis to the impersonal forces underlying social development.[10]

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These points can be illustrated by means of a handful of extracts from Dallas's newspaper reviews of works from the early 1860s generally understood as representing the sensation boom. In the 1860 notice of Collins's *The Woman in White* already referred to, the Scots critic emphasized the basic point that the novelist was not obliged to choose between plotting and characterization, but rather might seek to balance the two:

> We shall not afflict our readers by dwelling on the fashionable German jargon as to the relations of the subjective and the objective in fiction – as to the doctrine of free will, or the victory of man over circumstance, implied in a feeble plot; and as to the doctrine of necessity, or the conquest of man by circumstance, implied in a good plot. We must be content to ask, in the name of common sense, why great characters should not be mixed up with romantic incidents and complicated events. ... Certainly we do not see the combination of both excellencies in the present novel of Mr. Wilkie Collins. But neither do we see why the story should not be as clever as it is, and should not at the same time delineate character better than it does.
>
> ([Dallas], 'The Woman in White', p. 6a)

Dallas also reverted to *The Woman in White* in reviewing Dickens's *Great*

Expectations in 1861, noting that, initially serialized in the latter's twopenny weekly miscellany *All the Year Round*, both novels had negotiated with varying degrees of success a publishing format deemed irredeemably proletarian:

> The method of publishing an important work of fiction in monthly instalments was considered a hazardous experiment, which could not fail to set its mark upon the novel as a whole. Mr. Dickens led the way in making the experiment, and his enterprise was crowned with such success that most of the good novels now find their way to the public in the form of a monthly dole. ... But what are we to say to the new experiment which is now being tried of publishing good novels week by week? Hitherto the weekly issue of fiction has been connected with publications of the lowest class—small penny and halfpenny serials that found in the multitude some compensation for the degradation of their readers. ... Altogether, his [Dickens's] success was so great as to warrant the conclusion ... that the weekly form of publication is not incompatible with a very high order of fiction.
>
> ([Dallas], 'Great Expectations', p. 6c)

In his early 1863 review of Collins's *No Name* alongside Ellen Wood's *Mrs. Halliburton's Troubles*, Dallas dwelt on the fugitive nature of literary fiction, referring jestingly to the headache its profusion was causing for the Head of the British Library:[11]

> The novel lives its season and is then forgotten. ... The novels that are a quarter of a century old—those of Marryat and Cooper, Hook and Mrs. Gore, though they are as good as some of the best which are now produced, are almost unknown to the new race of beings who support a modern circulating library. Perhaps Mr. Panizzi would be at a loss to say which he finds it most difficult to deal with, the novels or the periodical publications. The class of works which come under the letters "P.P." ... threaten to usurp the whole library, and we should imagine that the works of fiction assume the same menacing proportions and the same ephemeral character.

([Dallas], 'New Novels', p. 7c)

In the course of the autumn 1863 notice of Braddon's latest novel *Eleanor's Victory*, in a passage later reprinted almost *verbatim* in *The Gay Science*,[12] Dallas attempted to define in abstract terms the key distinction between novels of character and of plot:

> It is more satisfactory to the pride of human nature to write and to read a novel of character; but we are not sure that, viewed in the abstract, such a work is either more true or more philosophical than the other species of fiction in which the plot is of most importance. ... Both profess to give us pictures of life, and both have to do with certain characters going through certain actions. The difference between the two lies solely in the relation of the characters portrayed to the actions described. In the novel of character man appears moulding circumstances to his will, directing the action for himself, supreme over incident and plot. In the opposite class of novel man is represented as made and ruled by circumstance; he is the victim of change and the puppet of intrigue.
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> ([Dallas], 'Eleanor's Victory', p. 11a)

Following an arithmetical reckoning of the 'deluge of fiction' currently pouring from the printing presses in both serial and volume formats,[13] in the course of his 1864 review covering both Oliphant's *The Perpetual Curate* and Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, the critic launched a head-on attack on the current abuse of the term 'sensation fiction', with a recent diatribe by a high-ranking clergyman particularly in his sights:[14]

> The Archbishop of York the other day made an onslaught on the class of novels which are called sensational; but we confess to being in considerable doubt as to the meaning of the phrase; for, strictly speaking, all literature that is not sensational must be soporific. It must either make a sensation or dull sensation. The name of sensation is a mere bugbear. If in sensation there is any real evil, then let it be expressed in plain language. We do not in the least wonder that moralists and dignitaries of the Church should begin anxiously to inquire what are

> likely to be the effects of novels on the national mind. But the most serious questions are suggested not by this or that species of novel but by the whole mass of our fictitious literature.
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> ([Dallas], 'Novels', p. 8d)

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I hope these few brief passages may be sufficient to suggest that Dallas's interventions in the 'Sensation Debate' of the 1860s were both innovative and cogent as well as timely, so that Collins's career undoubtedly benefitted from them even if he was not fully aware of his debt. In concluding, from a personal perspective as an aging Victorian scholar, I should point out that this essay also represents a belated attempt to connect meaningfully the two single authors to whom I have most devoted attention during my own career.

Notes

1 For a brief life of Dallas, see Law & Taylor, eds, *The Gay Science*, pp. xvi-xix.

2 The second occasion is even less specific. It relates to [Dallas], 'Novels in Season', reviewing the latest novels by Reade and Braddon in early 1864, where the journalist praised Collins on more than one occasion, in particular writing: '... Miss Braddon has shown that she can write with great rapidity. In this respect she is very unlike the master of her school, Mr. Wilkie Collins. We do not know what his actual mode of working may be; perhaps it is very easy; but it appears to be very slow and laborious, and to the last degree artful. It would be difficult to name any novels which are at once so amusing as his, and yet so constantly in every page challenge criticism.' (p. 6b). In response, writing to Charles Ward from Rome on 14 January 1864, Collins commented: 'And so The Times is beginning to pat me on the back – is it?' (Baker et al., eds., [0566]).

3 See [Dallas], 'New Novels', reviewing *No Name*; the third work was *No Thoroughfare*, the 1867 Christmas number of *All the Year Round*, co-written with Dickens, and noticed in *The Times* on 27 December 1867.

4 See Law & Taylor, eds, *E.S. Dallas in 'The Times'*, pp. 45, 55, & 245.

5 *Ibid*., pp. xl-xlii.

6 See Law, 'From "my friend" ...'.

7 See: in general, Maunder; and in particular, Law, 'Sensation Fiction and the

Publishing Industry', and Law, 'Periodicals, Popular Fiction and the Affordances of Digital Collections.'

8 See the detailed discussion of this series in Law, *The Periodical Press Revolution*, pp. 1-5.

9 See Law & Taylor, eds, *The Gay Science*, pp. 204-29.

10 For a fuller discussion of this point, see Law, *The Periodical Press Revolution*, pp. 165-68.

11 At the British Museum Antonio Genesio Maria Panizzi (1797-1879) was in turn: Assistant Librarian, 1831-1837; Keeper of Printed Books, 1837-1856 (a period when the Museum's holdings rose from 235,000 to 540,000 volumes); and Head Librarian, 1856-1866. See Law & Taylor, eds, *E.S. Dallas in 'The Times'*, p. 176n4.

12 Recycled in *The Gay Science*, Ch. XVII; see Law & Taylor, eds, p. 219.

13 The passage in question was recycled in *The Gay Science*, Ch. XVII; see Law & Taylor, eds, p. 216.

14 See Unsigned, 'The Archbishop of York on Works of Fiction', discussing an address by Archbishop William Thomson to the members of the Huddersfield Church Institute on the evening of 31 October 1864.

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——. 'Eleanor's Victory', *The Times* (3 October 1863), p. 11a–b. [Review of the novel by M. E. Braddon.]

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