Wilkie Collins and Copyright

Sundeep Bisla

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27564
The Manuscript as Writer’s Estate in *Basil*

The law, full of respect for the merchant’s cargo, for the écus acquired through work that is physical in some way or other, and often by dint of vile actions, the law protects landed property; it protects the house of the proletarian who has toiled and sweated—but it confiscates the work [œuvre] of the poet who has been thinking.

—Balzac, “Letter to Authors” 64

Championing Settling

The main contention of this chapter—that in *Basil* (1852) Collins attempts to equate the author’s manuscript with land—is not an earth-shaking proposition, to say the least. However, this equation becomes much more suggestive when it is placed within the broader contexts of Collins’s own and his intellectual culture’s development. Viewed from, for example, the position from which this study has set out, it becomes an instance of our author’s trusting in the complete ascendancy of the settling function, as well as in ideological or rhetorical manipulation’s power to keep that ascendancy in place. As Collins continues his investigations into iterability in the subsequent novels in his project, we will see him come to question that early trust.

That Collins’s project should begin with an attempt at the rhetorical conflation of the author–work tie with the landowner–land relation—signaled, among other things, by our delirious author-diarist protagonist Basil losing control of his manuscript in tandem with the villain Mannion losing his handhold on the slippery coastal cliffs at Land’s End—is not surprising.
His literary hero Balzac had attempted the same conflation—via a rhetorical shaming—in his “Letter to Authors” of 1834 in the passage cited in the epigraph above.

It is understandable that the twenty-eight-year-old Collins, when beginning his career, should have been tempted to adopt a strategy that so many thinkers preceding him had (and so many following him would), that of equating materiality with textuality and thereby attempting to sweep under the rug the troublesome breaking function. He was, however, setting himself up—in this attempt to, so to speak, create land from rhetoric—as the target of a potential De Manian-style deconstruction whereby mere rhetoric is found not to be up to the task that it has been set. Remarkably, it would be Collins himself who would implicitly make this critique (a type of self-correction of which very few thinkers have proven themselves capable) through his move away from this initial naïve standpoint in the rest of the works making up his unified long-novel project. Looking closely at this early narrative, we see Collins establishing the base level from which he will begin distinguishing himself from the majority of thinkers who would be professing solely a belief in the existence of the settling function of the iterability of the mark.

In *Basil* Collins attempts to explore rhetoric’s and ideological manipulation’s potential for creating and controlling property at the same time that he, in support of this effort, allegorizes the literary artist’s transition from upper-class, chosen vessel of the muse to industrious working man laboring in the service of making his own fortune and way in the world, a transformation seen also in, as we will see later in this chapter, contemporary Parliamentary debates over the extension of copyright. Collins here does not seem at this point prepared to acknowledge that iterability’s two conflicting functions would be rendering it too evanescent a concept to allow for the establishment of literary property—the foundation on which he will be building his figurative “land” in *Basil*—as anything more definite than an ideological construct. Collins refuses to acknowledge that writing’s breaking function, an aspect that must necessarily always accompany the settling function, could possibly also “infect” that property that settling had come to establish, setting a strict limit on the stability (and control of) the literary work (as will happen with regard to the destiny of pirated copies of *The Woman in White*) if not also similarly limiting the personality of the author using language (as will happen in the narrative of *The Moonstone*).

1. See Collins’s long, laudatory study of Balzac written for Household Words in 1859 (“Portrait”). Balzac, Fenimore Cooper, and Walter Scott were Collins’s “three ‘Kings of Fiction’” (Peters 377).
Here in this early work, the discourses of self-eroding property-based and personality-based authorship are left largely out of play. They will have to wait to be taken up in the later masterpieces. In those works, Collins will be willing, in a way that he was not yet in *Basil*, to explore the disintegrational or corrosive implications of the conjunction of the author’s identity with language.  

The Comfortable Deniability of the Paradox of Iterability

The breaking function can be either ignored or considered more controllable and/or less disturbing than it actually is (admittedly itself a type of ignoring). These strategies for denigrating breaking are time-honored intellectual practices, methods of allowing Enlightenment-influenced thinkers to avoid the realm of paradox and to remain safe “at home” in that of logic. The implicit, often unacknowledged, hope is that logic will be enough to adequately deal with the challenge posed by iterability. However, the two functions being equally powerful, the efficacy of these practices cannot hold up for very long. Nevertheless, the thinkers continually will be trying.

One preferred strategy is for thinkers to “talk past” the issues in dispute, to miss (the existence of) the significant point of contention. This strategy often manifests itself in the dream of “reconciling” the two functions, that is, in other words, effectively discursively neglecting breaking, a strategy that has been attempted quite often both before and after the nineteenth century. For one instance of this attempt at rhetorical reconciliation we might look to Catherine Gallagher’s *Nobody’s Story* in which that critic holds that

Behind the descriptions of proudly poor, dispossessed, and thereby dignified authors stood a background of beliefs about authorial property rights. What, after all, would be so pathetic about Charlotte Lennox’s labor being “chiefly gainful to others” if there was no presumption that she had some “natural” right to profit from her productions? (155)
Here we are presented with a conception akin to the settling function in this “natural’ right.” This conception is then rhetorically reconciled with its opposing function:

The rhetoric of dispossession and dignity [settling] relied on the rather new idea that authors had some legally recognized vendable property [breaking] that served as the basis of their livelihood. . . . Both the idea that authors should be their own people and the idea that they are the original owners of their copyrights [settling] indicate that their new dignity, the insistence on their worth and the unfairness of their lot was intertwined at mid-century with their characterization as dispossessed proprietors [breaking]. (155–57; emphasis added)

Gallagher here is attempting to persuasively resolve the tension by tying to a particular time period the transhistorical breaking function. She is endeavoring to pass off as intimately connected a clearly time-bound ability by women to gain a livelihood by writing and a clearly eternal disposessability of breaking-function-vulnerable writers, regardless of gender. More significantly, she mixes the two functions and their effects indiscriminately and employs rhetoric implying such mixing to be acceptable. However, far from “relying on” each other, the two functions, as we will see, have constantly remained in conflict, a truth of which Collins at this early stage of his project was himself most adamantly in denial.

In a more recent manifestation of this attempt at impossible reconciliation, Mark Rose, delivering a lecture at UCLA Law School, outlines two “incompatible” metaphors—viewing books as children and viewing books as real estate—that have been utilized by our culture throughout history to depict the author–work relation. He argues that the “fit” of the metaphors, both between themselves and with regard to the circumstances of copyright, is not a good one:

[T]he paternity and real estate metaphors are in some respects incompatible. The former represents copyright as something distinctive and personal, an extension of the author’s self in the form of a child. The latter represents copyright as objective and impersonal, a mere commodity like any other. The difficulty is that the unconscious of copyright is a mixed metaphor. (“Copyright” 9)

The literary work is shown to be a schizophrenic entity: an intrinsic emanation of the author’s self and, at the same time, an always-already-alienated
commercial commodity. This “mixed metaphor,” Rose argues, is dangerous, because it leads to situations such as the assimilation of “even mundane commodities to the privileged language of creativity” (10) and to the establishment of “the problematic notion that children might be treated as commodities” (12). In past judicial opinions, Rose notes, circus posters have been compared to Rembrandt paintings and surrogacy disputes have been decided along mentally-conceptual rather than biologically-conceptual lines. He asks how we are to reconcile these two clashing systems of metaphor and negotiate the schizophrenia crystallizing around “the notion that copyright is grounded in personhood and the need for a property law to regulate trade in vendible works” (9; emphasis added). He believes a resolution of the tension between creativity and commerce to be in fact possible: “A persuasive solution to the problems our metaphors pose will be one that does not simply reject the old tropes but finds new ways to understand them” (15). In essence, the solution lies in the realm of what Rose calls “rhetoric”: “From the point of view of copyright’s metaphors, this is not so much a logical problem as it is a rhetorical problem. That is, the issue is not truth so much as persuasion. . . . The solution should . . . have roots in the metaphorical patterns that already exist in the discourse of copyright” (10; emphasis added). The vagueness of the characteristics of Rose’s desired solution here is a sign that quite possibly no such rhetorical solution per se exists.

I hold that the tension noted by Rose signals not so much a “rhetorical problem,” the improper application of metaphors, say, as it does a foundational conflict underlying the attempted control of the paradoxical workings of language. Beginning from a simple investigation of an “incompatibility” between metaphorical representations, Rose’s analysis touches on a fundamental linguistic problem. Unfortunately, he turns back and away from his object of inquiry and seeks for a logical “solution” (this term signifying Rose’s continuing allegiance to logic in general) to his conundrum. Reinventing Hegel’s aufhebung, Rose’s analysis, like Gallagher’s above, seeks to logically resolve what it finds to be a troubling instance of paradox. It should come as a warning to those following in Rose’s wake that the demand for inexorable “progress” (of the standard, i.e., non-deconstructive, type) attaching to Enlightenment logic should hold such sway as to leave him feeling prompted by the stark difference in the common metaphorical characterizations of the same thing to propose strategies for uniting the two metaphors, for, in his terms, “solving” the problem.

I contend that there is no “solution” per se, at least no logic-based,

---

3. See Rose’s “Mothers and Authors” for an elaboration of the latter.
progress-valorizing one. The nature of iterability being fundamentally paradoxical, there is no means of halting the continual bifurcation in its many manifestations. Instead of seeking to unite the two entities Rose should simply have been asking why the same thing, iterability, should be found to be manifesting itself in such disparate ways, as land (representing breaking for Rose, but representing settling for, as we will see, the young Collins) or as children (representing settling for Rose). He should have been asking why these conflicting metaphors characterizing the control of language as simultaneously facile and impossible would continually be surfacing. No top-down manipulation can or will remain effective for very long. Wishing for this type of solution—in Rose’s case in of all places Southern California—is akin to attempting to cement-over the San Andreas Fault. It is like treating as a mere surface-level rift a profound theoretical one. Lecturing in this same region of shifting ground, Derrida remarks, “we are used to theoretical earthquakes here” (“Some Statements” 68), and, at least in this case, he is correct: in essence, iterability will continually be offering “theoretical earthquakes” that themselves will continually be undoing any “progress” that temporarily might have been made through “surface-level” rhetorical manipulations of copyright discourse.\(^4\) The belief that “copyright

\(^4\) Reconciling the two states being impossible through the simple application of persuasive rhetoric or logic, Rose’s metaphors will always remain incompatible. Not surprisingly, we see the tension continually re-arising over the history of copyright decisions and legislation. That is, despite the explicit testimony of several statutes, copyright remains unable conclusively to stay either solely concerned with providing a motor for advancement through monetary incentive or, on the other hand, protecting the author’s personality. The author’s relation to the market continually threatens any sort of close identification of the author with the text, and of the text with the author. The most significant disruption of the close author–work bond—what I am calling the author-as-creator construct—has been the author-as-disseminator construct, the need for the work to go out on the market, to move from private to public. This particular need has, in our ever-more market-driven age, continually threatened to take control of the entire scene. But it has nevertheless been consistently hampered in this quest. The former construct—the idea of copyright’s foundation in the personhood of the author providing the basis for ownership of the work—has persisted. For example, Rose points out that in 1991 in a “landmark decision” the Supreme Court “reasserted the importance of creativity to copyright doctrine” (“Copyright” 10). In that particular case, *Feist v. Rural Telephone* (1991), it was decided that the “spark of creativity,” or minimal-degree “originality,” trumps the monetary protection/incentive motive for copyright (345–49). The court held, “originality is not a stringent standard; it does not require that facts be presented in an innovative or surprising way. It is equally true, however, that the selection and arrangement of facts cannot be so mechanical or routine as to require no creativity whatsoever . . . creativity rewards originality, not effort” (362–64). Just when the death of the author would seem on the verge of having been officially declared, “the author” qua creator rises again. Something strange is at work, and the source of that strangeness—as Collins would come to learn, indeed to teach himself during his major phase—is situated at the foundational level of the workings of language. Similarly, the adjustments that copyright has undergone over its history have moved it in both directions, sometimes simultaneously. To provide one example: the progressive disarticulation of the work from the author’s vitality in the lengthening of copyright’s duration beyond death has been
is grounded in personhood,” a common rhetorical manifestation of the settling function, is one that *must*, as a result of the peculiar workings of linguistic repetition, continually come into conflict with the “need for a property law to regulate trade in vendible works,” a common rhetorical manifestation of the breaking function (Rose, “Copyright” 9).

Collins and Rose, a nineteenth-century author and a twenty-first-century copyright historian, are both attuned to the same difficulty, the incompatibility continually making itself felt with regard to the control of linguistic emanations and productions. And both have a similar goal: to undo that difficulty or at least somehow reduce the discomfort caused by it. Collins’s strategy will be different from Rose’s. Over the course of writing the five fictions discussed in detail in this study, one or two standing out as amongst the most enduring masterpieces in English literature, Collins will come to realize that the mixed metaphors of copyright had not come into existence through the play of everyday rhetorical negotiations and surface-level metaphorical patternings and as such those negotiations and patternings were not the location of the possible solution to the rift. Collins’s major fictions will contest the efficacy of any purely rhetorical solutions to the dilemma of authorship. I will be arguing here that, in his major phase, Collins moves beyond simple discursive-level manipulation to radical recontextualization/refiguration of context. That is, Collins’s recognition of the fundamental incompatibility between creation and dissemination is contemporaneous with (both the cause and effect of) his shiftings from capitulation (in *Basil*’s unquestioning adherence to the metaphor of manuscript seen as a type of land) to attempted manipulation (in *The Woman in White*’s unsuccessful, relatively novel metaphorization of the text as helpless young female) to, finally, wholesale recontextualization of the metaphors within radically altered systems (the sensation and mystery novel forms in the novels *No Name*, *Armadale*, and *The Moonstone*). Collins will come to realize that the fundamental incompatibility is not to be resolved by anything less than a radical reimagining of the existing systems in play. Over the course of pursuing his long–novel project, Collins will come to understand that the incompatible metaphors had arisen from, and were pointing back to, a deeper rupture, a rupture stemming from the conflict inherent in the peculiar functioning of language. Quite simply, they revealed the foundational struggle always already being brought into being, to speak metaphorically, from far, far below the surface, by the iterability of language.

---

a movement testifying to *both* copyright’s personality- and monetary-basis, depending on whether it was at the time primarily benefiting authors or the publishers and corporations to whom the former had, more often than not, signed over their rights.
Chapter 2

_Basil and the Literary Artist_

It is with good reason that John Sutherland remarks in a classic study that “The generally accepted starting point for sensational fiction is 1859 and the serial publication of Wilkie Collins’s _The Woman in White_” (“Wilkie Collins” 243). Ever since Margaret Oliphant named and defined the genre—seeing it as a sort of real-life romance⁵—in the process of reviewing Collins’s _The Woman in White_,⁶ this perspective on Collins has been generally accepted:

Mr. Wilkie Collins is not the first man who has produced a sensation novel. By fierce expediens of crime and violence, by _diablerie_ of divers kinds, and by the wild devices of a romance which smiled at probabilities, the thing has been done before now. . . . [But] amid all these predecessors in the field, Mr. Wilkie Collins takes up an entirely original position. Not so much as a single occult agency is employed in the structure of his tale. (“Sensation Novels” 565–66)

While Oliphant’s delineation of a novel filled with improbable, but not supernatural, circumstance serves as a good description of all the novels I will be discussing in this book, a description as all-encompassing as this (the same could be said of the productions of Ann Radcliffe for instance) has the potential for obscuring crucial distinctions. I do not find Collins’s major fictions to be in the same set as the works produced during the 1860s by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Ellen Wood. We can see Collins’s divergence from the trend that he would soon be, ironically, founding to be evident from the beginning, actually even before the beginning, of that genre, in his narrative of 1852 _Basil; A Story of Modern Life_. Collins’s interest in what I will here be considering a “linguistic sensationalism” leads him, before the genre has even properly begun, to deeper insights than will be available to the other sensationalists attempting to follow him in what they understand his project to be (the subversion of conventional mores or the championing of possibility over probability—necessary steps but mere opening gambits in his larger, more elaborate chess game). I emphasize Collins’s difference because, unfortunately, the after-the-fact miscategorization

---

⁵. Walter C. Phillips similarly defines sensationalism as “romance for the populace” (38).
⁶. Though Oliphant also considered in her review Dickens’s _Great Expectations_, Dickens’s reviewers and critics never came generally to view him as a simple sensationalist. Fortunately, Collins criticism has recently been expanding its perspective. Good recent discussions by Lillian Nayder (_Unequal Partners_), Graham Law (“Professional Writer”), and William Baker et al. (Introduction) have reassessed Collins’s relation to the literary market.
of Collins as a sensationalist, in coming to obscure the more interesting aspects of this one of his works, has often served to misdirect the criticism of the works written in Basil’s wake.

Twentieth-century critics have almost invariably been prompted to consider Basil a sensation novel avant la lettre: Ronald R. Thomas calls it “the first novel that Collins wrote in the sensation mode” (“Wilkie Collins” 497; emphasis added); Catherine Peters holds that “Basil, rather than The Woman in White, has a strong claim to be considered the first sensation novel” (118); Tamar Heller writes that “[b]y the 1860s, critics would find a name for works like Basil: the sensation novel” (59); and Dorothy Goldman, viewing the work from a similarly retrospective vantage point, describes Basil as Collins’s first “characteristic” novel and as, paradoxically, “springing from” his later more famous works The Woman in White and The Moonstone (Collins, Basil vii).

All these critics have a point. This story is not without its novelty. That novelty, particularly the narrative’s shocking forthrightness, enlivened by up-to-date references to London omnibuses and newly-macadamized streets, is made by Collins, however, itself to work in the service of a very old style of thinking (text as land, the settling function as the sole one).

I will here be attempting to take a fresh look at this early one of Collins’s drama-filled narratives, attempting to glimpse beyond the entrancing level of its purported “sensationalism” in order to notice its more formalistic aspects, specifically its negotiations with the materiality of the letter and the roots of language, in an effort to see what following the less travelled critical path might allow us to find. While viewing Basil as a proto-”sensation novel,” that is, as a novel preparing the way for that trend of later fictions that would “graft a progressive approach to the Victorian bêtes of sex and violence onto the primitive and even childish formulas of stage melodrama” (Winifred Hughes 5), undoubtedly opens up many avenues for discussion, it unfortunately closes off many others called up by this particular work and by the masterpieces of Collins’s major period. Broadening the interpretation of the first dream had by the main character in that narrative cannot help but have interesting ramifications for our later examinations of Collins’s more firmly established “sensation novels.” My consideration of Basil as a sensation novel, in coming to obscure the more interesting aspects of this one of his works, has often served to misdirect the criticism of the works written in Basil’s wake.

Twentieth-century critics have almost invariably been prompted to consider Basil a sensation novel avant la lettre: Ronald R. Thomas calls it “the first novel that Collins wrote in the sensation mode” (“Wilkie Collins” 497; emphasis added); Catherine Peters holds that “Basil, rather than The Woman in White, has a strong claim to be considered the first sensation novel” (118); Tamar Heller writes that “[b]y the 1860s, critics would find a name for works like Basil: the sensation novel” (59); and Dorothy Goldman, viewing the work from a similarly retrospective vantage point, describes Basil as Collins’s first “characteristic” novel and as, paradoxically, “springing from” his later more famous works The Woman in White and The Moonstone (Collins, Basil vii).

All these critics have a point. This story is not without its novelty. That novelty, particularly the narrative’s shocking forthrightness, enlivened by up-to-date references to London omnibuses and newly-macadamized streets, is made by Collins, however, itself to work in the service of a very old style of thinking (text as land, the settling function as the sole one).

I will here be attempting to take a fresh look at this early one of Collins’s drama-filled narratives, attempting to glimpse beyond the entrancing level of its purported “sensationalism” in order to notice its more formalistic aspects, specifically its negotiations with the materiality of the letter and the roots of language, in an effort to see what following the less travelled critical path might allow us to find. While viewing Basil as a proto-”sensation novel,” that is, as a novel preparing the way for that trend of later fictions that would “graft a progressive approach to the Victorian bêtes of sex and violence onto the primitive and even childish formulas of stage melodrama” (Winifred Hughes 5), undoubtedly opens up many avenues for discussion, it unfortunately closes off many others called up by this particular work and by the masterpieces of Collins’s major period. Broadening the interpretation of the first dream had by the main character in that narrative cannot help but have interesting ramifications for our later examinations of Collins’s more firmly established “sensation novels.” My consideration
of Collins’s relations to textuality in his unified novel series begins here, with a rereading and recontextualization of what might be considered the first “sensation scene” in the first “sensation” novel written by Collins: the first dream experienced by his hero Basil in the novel of the same name. I choose this scene as my primary point of entry into Collins’s major fictions because much depends on one’s not accepting the lures—especially the initial ones—continually held out by this author so skilled at manipulating the red herring and so reluctant throughout his career to crassly expose his designs. Collins was a master of the screening process and lifting this initial one of his screens will, I hope, provide a new means of assessing the rest of the fictions of his major period. As one comes readily to understand when analyzing Collins’s elaborately plotted fictions, if there comes an instant when all the surface signs appear to be pointing in one direction, say, toward something as comfortably stereotypical (indeed so stereotypical as to appear anachronistically proto-Freudian) as an amorous young man’s dream leaving us with, seemingly, an archetypal example of sensation-as-sexuality, that is probably the moment to begin looking in another direction, say, in that of sensation-as-textuality. Recall the sexually-suggestive red herring to be placed two years later in “A Stolen Letter,” “all the drawers . . . were left open.” Like the artfully-wise lawyer in that story, we need always to keep in mind what kind of customer we are dealing with in reading Wilkie Collins.

*Basil* is usually read from a psycho-sexually sensationalistic perspective. This is understandable. Suspiciously all too understandable. I must admit that the narrative does indeed at first glance make for a most luridly shocking story. It is a fictional autobiography written and narrated by an eponymous and pseudonymous author-hero. Basil is the second son in a family of great station in England tracing its lineage back before the Norman conquest. As his father is immensely proud of his position among the English gentry, Basil is sure that a marriage with the beautiful Margaret Sherwin, a girl he has seen one day on an omnibus and then tempestuously dreamt of, will never be approved of as she is the daughter of a mere linen-draper. Therefore, he is willing to allow himself to be directed by Margaret’s father when Mr. Sherwin suggests a secret marriage that should only be consummated a year to the day after the official ceremony has taken place. Sherwin proposes this plan so that Basil might have time to break the news to his father and because Margaret, at seventeen, seems to him a year too young to be truly married. Basil regrets the agreement immediately, but nevertheless feels honor-bound to keep his word.
Early in Basil's year of endurance, Sherwin's managing-man, Robert Mannion, returns from a business trip to France. Mannion is a former son of the aristocracy who, as a result of a past family disgrace, has plummeted in station, making his way down through the social ranks via a series of occupations, including having served a stint as a plagiarist of stories by dead authors. Mannion bears a secret enmity towards Basil's family, for it happens that Basil's father had instigated Mannion's fall by bearing witness against Mannion's father in the latter's prosecution for the forgery of a bill of credit. To this mortal grudge has been added a further one against Basil himself, as Mannion had himself been planning an elopement with the then-willing Margaret before the expeditious wedding to Basil had taken place. Mannion resolves to exact revenge for both the present affront and that one in the past through the bringing off of a surreptitious sexual assignation with Margaret the night before the year is to be complete, the night before she is to become Basil's wife "in fact, as well as in name" (82). (It is implied that Mannion has a secret future objective in carrying out this plan, but whether or not this design is the eventual fathering of the heir or heirs of Basil's line is left ambiguous.)

Happening upon the furtive couple leaving early from an aunt's party, Basil follows them unremarked to a hotel. There, having bribed the house boy, he listens through the wall of an adjoining room—the readers being kept at a suitable distance by the narration at this point—to the infamous wrong being done to him. Transformed by his rage, he then awaits the illicit lovers outside the hotel. When Mannion emerges first, Basil, in a fashion quite uncharacteristic of his usually gentle manner, proceeds to man-handle him, blinding him in one eye and deeply scarring his face. After this short burst of self-alienating rage, Basil reassumes his usual character and falls into a swoon. Thereafter, the secret of Basil's marriage is disclosed to his father and as well as being disinherited Basil is, literally, torn from the family, that is, from the family scrap-book. After Margaret dies of typhus, Mannion, in a rage over his disfigurement and Margaret's death, pursues Basil to the end of England. In Cornwall, where Basil has been hiding on the outskirts of a small fishing village while writing the history of the foregoing events, Mannion finds him and pursues him out to the cliffs at Land's End. There, while Basil climbs along a dangerous cliff-face to safety, the less careful Mannion falls to his death. Once again, the sympathetic Basil falls into a swoon, in this instance almost dying, recovering only through the timely intercession of his younger sister Clara and older brother Ralph.

Presented with such a narrative, one could well be excused for choosing to notice solely its psycho-sexual aspects. But while in the case of this
particular work and, indeed, throughout Collins's career, the sexual aspects of his sensationalism are very much in evidence, and never lost on the critics, just as significant are the textual elements of that “sensationalism.” This new context does not justify the use of that word without quotation marks, a textual sensationalism being a contradiction in terms. Of course, the tendency in the criticism to overlook that textuality is easily explained. The critics here are subject to their own predispositions, especially the generic ones that they themselves have pre-established. Since the titillation caused by the sexual and violent aspects of Collins’s stories is for most of them manifestly “the point” of the “sensation fiction” label applied to his later fictions and retroactively to this one, they are from the beginning—indeed from before the beginning—immured in a cage of their own making. It becomes ever more difficult to see beyond this cage once Freudian perspectives are embraced by literary criticism in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, the critics coming after Collins, that attentive student of human nature, unfortunately position themselves at precisely the point where he would have wanted them to be. They place themselves at the mercy of an author adept at the magic trick—a fooling of themselves in which they are more than half-willing participants—that would be most likely to mystify them, the trick of exploiting what we might call the “Freudian mindset” so as to facilitate better the delivery of his veiled ideological messages below the level of conscious resistance. In hopes of avoiding being similarly hypnotized by the sexual Collins, this study will be firmly latching itself onto an image of a Collins who has here embarked on an initial attempt at representing the reification of the text as land as a means of both reinforcing the always threatened author–work relation and sedimenting the (fundamentally unstable) stable-text ideal.\footnote{The fact that the particular screen that Collins lands upon should come in the particular form of the sexual awakening of a young man will have to remain a question to be dealt with by future critics.}

\textbf{Basil’s Dream}

All of this begins, as any good prefiguring of the psychoanalytic encounter might be expected to, with a dream. As Basil’s dream commences, he finds himself standing on a wide plain bordered on either side by woods and hills. Approaching him is a dark, seductive woman:

\begin{quote}
I stood on a wide plain. On one side, it was bounded by thick woods, whose dark secret depths looked unfathomable to the eye: on the other, by hills,
\end{quote}
ever rising higher and higher yet, until they were lost in bright, beautifully
white clouds, gleaming in refulgent sunlight. . . . As I still stood on the plain
and looked around, I saw a woman coming towards me from the wood.
Her stature was tall; her black hair flowed about her unconfined; her robe
was of the dun hue of the vapour and mist which hung above the trees,
and fell to her feet in dark thick folds. She came on towards me swiftly and
softly, passing over the ground like cloud-shadows over the ripe corn-field
or the calm water. . . . And now I could see her face plainly. Her eyes were
lustrous and fascinating, as the eyes of a serpent—large, dark and soft, as
the eyes of a wild doe. Her lips were parted with a languid smile; and she
drew back the long hair, which lay over her cheeks, her neck, her bosom,
while I was gazing on her. (Basil 45)

This scene is rendered in very suggestive terms, indeed, to the point
almost of absurdity. Approaching Basil from either of two strongly-con-
trasted regions bordering a type of symbolic plain are two strongly-con-
trasted women: the scandalous, dark figure described here, representing his
dark-haired beloved Margaret, and an innocent, fair woman, representing
his fair-haired sister Clara. Each figure attempts in her own particular man-
ner to lure Basil to her region and away from that of the other, the narrative
at this moment going so far as to say that they vie for his soul. This scene is
the point when Basil—situated uncannily like Walter Hartright on Hamp-
stead Heath at the beginning of The Woman in White, before, as D. A. Miller
has it, the woman’s touch on the shoulder will have awakened his (and a
general male reader’s) repressed nervousness (148–56)—chooses the life of
the sensuous, and very sensual, body over the chaste life of the mind and the
higher thoughts of the intellect. Basil allows himself to be dragged a short
way toward the woods by the dark woman before, having felt something at
his back, he turns:

Then, I felt as if a light were shining on me from the other side. I turned
to look, and there was the woman from the hills beckoning me away to
ascend with her towards the bright clouds above. Her arm, as she held it
forth, shone fair, even against the fair hills; and from her outstretched hand
came long thin rays of trembling light, which penetrated to where I stood,
cooling and calming wherever they touched me. (Basil 46)

The fair woman’s penetrative “thin rays of trembling light” represent a type
of inspiration or lightning—in French éclair, suggesting further that she
is a figure for his sister Clara. This inspiration from “on high” suggests a
connection between the hill she is standing on and the classical Mountain of the Muses. These subliminal literary antecedents having no useful effect on the young author Basil, however, our hero instead decides to go with the dark woman of the heated sensations:

I felt the rays of light that had touched me from the beckoning hand, depart; and yet once more I looked towards the woman from the hills. She was ascending again towards the bright clouds, and ever and anon she stopped and turned round, wringing her hands and letting her head droop, as if in bitter grief. . . . Now the woman, from the woods clasped me more closely than before, pressing her warm lips on mine. . . . I was drawn along in the arms of the dark woman, with my blood burning and my breath failing me, until we entered the secret recesses that lay amid the unfathomable depths of trees. There, she encircled me in the folds of her dusky robe, and laid her cheek close to mine, and murmured a mysterious music in my ear, amid the midnight silence and darkness of all around us. And I had no thought of returning to the plain again; for I had forgotten the woman from the fair hills, and had given myself up, heart, and soul, and body, to the woman from the dark woods. (46–47)

Very little effort is required to see sexuality in this dream. And, indeed, in her interesting psychological study of Collins’s works In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology, Jenny Bourne Taylor finds just that. That is, she finds the dream to be thematizing Basil’s ambivalently experienced sexual corruption: “The dream itself is both the explicit expression of sexual desire and a moralized comment on it. . . . Basil dreams of a landscape that is both a symbolic female body and an iconic moral hierarchy” (85). Taylor characterizes Basil’s allowing himself to be dragged along into the depths of the woods by the dark woman as his having gone over “into sexual engulfment and spiritual defilement” (85). Taylor here would seem to be on firm ground in her interpretation.

However, it would be less than justified, given the narrative’s other manifestly non-sexual concerns, to become overly-fixated by the sexual elements in the scene. It is important to also notice the scene’s textual elements, elements that assert themselves less apparently, and therefore perhaps more significantly in the case of this author who throughout his career would make a practice of planting “secret recesses” within his narrative architecture. This conjunction between writing and sex is not atypical for Collins, who was, as mentioned earlier, soon to become, whether willing or no, a major figure in
the sensation fiction movement, a genre that relied on cullings from the various Victorian storehouses recounting scandalous sexual vagaries and violent crimes. The startling scene of Count Fosco’s stealing and inscribing his own words within Marian Halcombe’s diary in *The Woman in White*, a theft and act of writing that many critics—falling for Collins’s trap—are prompted to describe as a figurative “rape” of Marian (see for example D. A. Miller 164 and Tromp 85), is perhaps the most famous scene in Collins’s work in which text and sex conjoin for this Victorian author so interested in the market-performance of his occasionally fairly lurid stories. I am arguing, however, that we need to look again at Basil’s dream and to focus this time not on the sexual aspects but on the textual ones. The “secret recesses that lay amid the unfathomable depths of trees” of Basil’s dream, when considered to be representing the inner depths of the pages of the book at the same time that they represent the scene of a sexual encounter, are a concise encapsulation of the twin foci of Collins’s subsequent major fictions.

Reconsidering the dream with a more textual focus, I find it to be anticipating Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, a representation of the Victorian literary artist in transition from high-class amanuensis to industrious working man, from the man concerned with inspiration coming from a “higher” source to the one colored by the inks he works in. Initially Basil is situated on a “wide plain” bounded on one side by hills and clouds and on the other by a thick wood. This bounded plain shares affinities, I would argue, with that famous textual meadow mentioned early on in Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* when Sir Benjamin Backbite describes the formatting of certain books of the time to be such as to leave us with “a neat rivulet of text . . . murmuring through a meadow of margin.” He is referring of course to the printing of poetry in the eighteenth century, but in Collins’s case it is possible to see this same type of metaphor at work, only in a character slightly altered to take account of the format of nineteenth-century prose fiction. Though we might, along with Taylor, consider the image of the disordered wood to be symbolic of the female pubis, the terms used to describe the dark woman’s approach suggest another image. The woods are connected with a specifically man-made order, that of a field of wheat—here called, as was the practice at the time, “corn”—ranging itself out within the boundaries of a meadow or field of margin, somewhat like, to bring things home, the text on the page, or screen, you are currently reading.

---

9. *The School for Scandal* I.i. (Sheridan 216). Sheridan seems to have been a significant influence on Collins. In the boat-house conversation in *The Woman in White* Collins has Count Fosco refer to another line from *The School for Scandal*: “I go—and leave my character behind me,” and in the “First Scene” of *No Name* Magdalen Vanstone makes her debut in a private production of *The Rivals*. 

---
Indeed, the scene sketches less a topography than a typography. As the dark woman comes toward Basil she passes over the ground “like cloud-shadows [passing] over the ripe corn-field...” This seemingly unimportant detail will show up again when Walter Hartright, in imitation of Chaucer, opens his narration in *The Woman in White* with the following bucolic reverie: “It was the last day of July. The long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, were beginning to think of the cloud-shadows on the corn-fields, and the autumn breezes on the sea-shore” (ed. Sutherland 6). Though slight, the phrase has significant implications. We are left by this analogy in *Basil* with an image suggesting less a natural profusion of disordered wood than a field covered by entities arranged in rows or furrows, like the lines on a page—a veritable wheat-field of text. The once-disordered wood thus is rendered in terms suggestive of the lines ranged, or planted, by a writer in the midst of his literary labors across a page of manuscript. Rather than viewing the scene as a movement across an anatomical landscape, we should instead see Basil to be—indeed perhaps especially in light of the scene’s overt sexual suggestiveness—choosing to become one with his manuscript, both the “historical romance” (*Basil* 25) he had been writing at the time of his having the dream as well as the autobiographical text—his oft-mentioned “manuscript”—he will be writing later when he recounts that dream. Basil’s move away from the detached realm of inspired artist as he makes his way beyond the range of the lightning thrown by the woman of the hills and walks off the marginal meadow and into the writing on the page, the wood, launches him on a project aimed at his becoming one with the writing that he pens on page after page, thereby more directly, more physically, participating in the creation of that work. Thus *Basil* puts into practice that relatively new conception, one that the contemporary copyright debates were helping to form, of the literary artist as laborer.\(^{10}\) This transformation mimics Basil’s change in class status in the narrative as he adjusts to his disinheritance by his father and his removal from the family home. As he goes off into the “secret recesses” with his “blood burning and [his] breath failing [him]” (46) he is certainly not going off to “soar above the Aonian mount, while [he] pursues things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” but, rather, dedicating himself to the

---

10. Peters suggests that Collins differed from the other young men working at *Household Words* in the early 1850s. As opposed to that contingent described by G. A. Sala as “about the idlest young dogs that squandered away their time on the pavements of Paris and London. *We would not work,*” Collins was “already a professional... a prolific journalist, prepared, like Dickens, to take infinite pains over the slightest article” (Peters 98).
difficult, and sweaty, proposition of fashioning legacies out of ink, paper, and the characters sown on page after page of text. Sex here thus turns out, as it so often does in Collins’s work, to have been serving as a means of hiding simply text.

This screening is not as strange as it may at first sound. Collins was a particularly private author, one who preferred to keep his motivations and maneuverings submerged. Interpretations finding sex and sexually charged matters in Collins’s fictions play directly into his hands by obscuring analysis of the textual (as well as other) aspects of those fictions. These particular types of interpretation rushing to take center stage in the literary critical realm, as they are so often prone to do (sex sells, in academia as well), then make it difficult simply to discern, let alone champion, the textual elements. References to sex in Collins’s works are quite pervasive and they are so often taken simply as such that one feels almost heretical taking them to be something—indeed anything—else, especially references to something as mundane as text. Thus, the argument that Collins’s sensationalism was of a peculiarly linguistic form is a difficult one to make. Nevertheless, that is precisely the contention I will be putting forward here. Indeed, it should not be surprising to be reading Collins’s fictions “against the grain.” More the king of screeners than he was even of inventors (as the title of Catherine Peters’s biography describes him), Collins was in a class by himself when it came to veiling his intentions.

To provide an example that I believe to be representative of much of Collins’s dealings with sex: in The Woman in White we are told that Sir Percival Glyde, one of the two villains in the narrative, had at one point in the past taken to “mixing” his “ink” in Mrs. Jane Anne Catherick’s “pot” during secret meetings between the two: “He was some time getting the ink the right colour (mixing it over and over again in pots and bottles of mine)” (ed. Sutherland 544). Though the circumstances would seem to insist on our giving in to the sexual or “Freudian” interpretation—as does Mr. Catherick: “You must know as well as I do what the notion was which my husband took into his head, when he found me and my fine-gentleman acquaintance meeting each other privately, and talking secrets together” (545)—to fall automatically into this perspective is also to fall into the pre-set trap of our fantastically cagey author. The truth of the matter, by Mrs. Catherick’s own admission (if we are to believe her testimony), is that the two of them were actually interested in textuality rather than sexuality. In an attempt to save her character, she begs Sir Percival to make a vindicating avowal attesting to that fact:
Chapter 2

“Do me justice—clear my character of a stain on it which you know I don't deserve. . . . [O]nly tell [my husband], on your word of honour as a gentleman, that he is wrong, and that I am not to blame in the way he thinks I am. Do me that justice, at least, after all I have done for you.” He flatly refused, in so many words. He told me, plainly, that it was his interest to let my husband and all my neighbours believe the falsehood—because, as long as they did so, they were quite certain never to suspect the truth. I had a spirit of my own; and I told him they should know the truth from my lips. His reply was short, and to the point. If I spoke, I was a lost woman, as certainly as he was a lost man. (545; emphasis added)

Our narrator Walter Hartright will remain skeptical of Mrs. Catherick's sexual innocence in this matter until he learns the fundamental lesson of all of Collins's major fictions: that sometimes the sexual reading can be screening the textual one. He considers that “the clue to discovery” of Glyde’s guilty secret resides “in those stolen meetings, in those familiar whisperings between the clerk's wife and ‘the gentleman in mourning’”:

Was it possible that appearances, in this case, had pointed one way, while the truth lay, all the while, unsuspected, in another direction? Could Mrs Catherick's assertion that she was the victim of a dreadful mistake, by any possibility be true? Or, assuming it to be false, could the conclusion which associated Percival with her guilt, have been founded in some inconceivable error? Had Sir Percival, by any chance, courted the suspicion that was wrong, for the sake of diverting from himself some other suspicion that was right? Here, if I could find it—here was the approach to the Secret, hidden deep under the surface of the apparently unpromising story which I had just heard. (482; emphasis added)

If this trick could be played on Hartright and the villagers of Welmingham in the narrative of *The Woman in White*, why could it not also have been played by Collins on his readers and even perhaps on those future professional readers of his, the literary critics? Could some of Collins's critics have been taking too seriously the sexually-charged misdirections put forward by an author continually described, misleadingly, and only in later times, it must be remembered, as the “father of the sensation novel”?

It is clear enough that Percival Glyde would rather be thought a libertine than have the much more damaging truth, that his birth is illegitimate, be circulated. *His* motivation for screening is clear. However, Collins's is not so readily apparent. Given the overtly moralizing nature of what has come to
be known as his “mission fiction” of the 1870s and 80s, Collins would not seem to have been an author who usually shied away from proclaiming his allegiances. However, in the next chapter I will be arguing that the negative example set by Dickens’s lack of success over the course of his calamitous 1842 trip to the United States had had a chilling effect on Collins. During his trip, Dickens had made several ill-reviewed speeches criticizing the Americans for their lack of morality with regard to rendering up to British authors their due.\footnote{See Welsh, Copyright 29–42 for a good discussion of Dickens’s efforts.} His complete lack of success disheartened him and he may well have advised Collins that a direct approach would meet with little success.

As we saw with the excess of reference available in the word “domestic” (national, material, familial, psychical, or textual) in the title The Evil Genius: A Domestic Story, Collins enjoyed screening his deeper intentions behind more easily seen-through surface readings. Thus, I would argue that our author is most secret when he looks to be most open, admittedly leaving the critic in a terribly uncertain situation. (Where is this game to stop?) In this study, I will be attempting to show that Collins realized that if one could create a diversion by, say, distracting the viewer with something he or she might already be predisposed to be interested in seeing, say, sexual intrigue, then one’s hidden agenda would be able to pass all the more unremarked. This is, admittedly, a dangerous game for an author to play and one which Collins excelled at at times undoubtedly—note his current, generally-accepted status as a mere constructor of puzzles—to his own detriment. His consummate artistry in screening his deeper-seated intentions has undoubtedly been a major cause of his works’ inability to generate significant later academic and cultural interest. Dickens’s sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, writing to a friend in 1873, described Collins as habitually being more than a bit pleased with his own cleverness: “[H]e has many fine qualities but he has an unusual amount of conceit and self-satisfaction—and I do not think any one can think Wilkie Collins a greater man than Wilkie Collins thinks himself” (Hogarth). A direct result of Collins’s seamless yet formidable meta-sophistication, paradoxically, has been the impressive durability—for more than a century after his death—of his literary-critical categorization as little more than an author of undemanding sensation novels filled with uncomplicated episodes of sex and violence. This practice of continually “pulling one over” on his readers may have backfired on Collins. Sometimes, an author can be too clever for his own literary-critical good. For example, it is to Collins’s credit—and loss—to
have predicted that his preferred type of sexual screening would keep the readers mesmerized long before the advent of Freudian psychoanalytic literary criticism would come along with its particular variety of obsessions to effectively seal the tomb, rendering his secrets nearly unassailable for a generation or more of literary critics.

For Collins at the early stage of his career when he was composing *Basil*, that is, before the constrictive “sensationalist” label had yet been applied, the sexual and violent aspects of his fictions were not ends in themselves. The significance of this particular example of Collins’s “sensationalism”—as will be seen to also surprisingly hold true of his other more famous attempts at sensation in the masterpieces of the 1860s—was the deployment of a certain “textual ideology” along with and behind the provocative veil of the sex and violence. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the mesmerizing sexual overtones of Basil’s first dream have obscured more textually-oriented interpretations of it. Having undoubtedly been influenced by D. A. Miller’s well-known discussion of closeting in Collins, Dorothy Goldman, editor of the Oxford edition of *Basil*, is prompted to confidently state that despite Collins’s later denials the book unquestionably is “a shocking analysis of psychosexual behaviour and [Collins] knew it” (*Basil* xxii). However, I will be arguing here that the implications of the story as a whole and of this dream scene in particular offer less an insight into Collins’s psyche (unless it is an insight into his constant need to screen his intentions) than they do an insight into his attitude toward the heavily-debated contemporary issue of authorial property rights, an issue that then will serve as Collins’s entry point into questions regarding the theoretical groundings of language.

**Debating Authorial Handiwork and Legacies**

Encapsulating the quintessential Collinsian sexual/textual moment, Basil’s dream offers a means of processing not only that character’s daytime sighting of an attractive girl on an omnibus but also contemporary Victorian debates about the nature of literary artistry. From 1837 to 1842 England’s House of Commons debated the issue of the proper length of time that ought to be allowed to the duration of the author’s proprietary legacy in his or her work. At issue was the balancing of authors’ heirs’ rights and the interests of the public. This debate marked a singular moment when the understanding of the author transitioned from that of artist inspired from “on high” to worker in a market economy. These contemporary issues all would come to be symbolically represented in Basil’s dream and the rest of the narrative of

However, during the times of the actual copyright debates themselves, Collins most probably cared little about the issue of literary copyright and its extension. He was thirteen years old and off experiencing the wonders of Italy when the debates over copyright began. He was eighteen and apprenticed to a tea merchant at the time they ended. During his teenage years, then—unless he was prompted by paternal influence coupled with the fact that he was the elder son of a famous painter—12—it is unlikely that Collins would have been contemporaneously following the discussion. Nevertheless, the issues brought into focus by the debates in Parliament were to pervade the literary culture and market that Collins would shortly be attempting, unsuccessfully, to enter. His repeated failures to find a publisher for his manuscript *Iolani; or, Tahiti as It Was*, a text written in 1844 but published only in 1999, came a mere two years after the bill’s passage. The issues explored in the parliamentary debates over copyright, it is my contention, informed the young Collins’s understanding of the nature of literary authorship, helping to shape his conception not only of his relation to his present and future works but also his relation to his chosen profession in general.

The last session of the House of Commons to sit before the death of William IV transitioned into the accession of Victoria to the dominium of England and its colonies was presented with the proposal for a significant extension of the duration of the term of copyright. Thomas Noon Talfourd, Sergeant-at-Law and member for the district of Reading, brought forward a private member’s bill proposing the establishment of a term so much in excess of the previously established duration of copyright that it occasioned more than a little debate. While the bill was altered in various minor ways in order to make it more palatable (i.e., no longer covering art works and no longer possessing a retroactive effect), throughout the course of the several attempts presided over by Talfourd to see it passed one thing remained constant—its provision for the extension of the duration of the term of copyright from the then-current twenty-eight years calculated from the year of publication (or until the death of the author, whichever turned

---

12. Collins’s father, the eminent painter William Collins, would have been interested in the first introduction of Talfourd’s bill as in that incarnation its provisions also extended to cover the arts of painting and design as well as literature. See *Sessional Papers* 1837 (380) I.573–85. This manifestation of the bill also included a clause that would have established a process for granting international copyright to authors residing outside England but, as Catherine Seville points out, this “clause was dropped after pressure from the government, which regarded international copyright as a matter of public policy, and an unsuitable subject for back-bench legislation” (*Literary Copyright Reform* 238).
out to be later) to sixty years after the death of the author. Talfourd’s bill, as a result of its stipulation for an extensive and conclusively posthumous term for the existence of copyright, would have established copyright as a principle connected less to the body of the writer and more to literary statute. Indeed, Talfourd held, his seemingly-radical revision was in actuality fairly conservative, since it went only a partial way toward re-establishing copyright in its proper relation to the author; for he believed that the individual author had been denied a rightful perpetual copyright in the debates held the century before. While the term as it had stood between 1814 and 1837 had certainly in many cases lasted fifteen, twenty, even twenty-five years beyond the date of the author’s death, depending on how soon after publication the inevitable had occurred, the argument was continually put forward by Talfourd and his supporters as one of the necessity, and indeed responsibility, of showing proper sympathy for the bereaved family. It was argued that it was more than hard-hearted for the law to be constructed in such a manner as to allow the earnings from copyright to be spirited away from the author’s family just at the moment when the death of the family patriarch and bread-winner had rendered them decidedly dispossessed in another way.

Although authors have never been exclusively male, the debate was framed in those terms. In large part, of course, this generalizing to the masculine may have been merely a linguistic commonplace. A common way of speaking that, depending on the speaker and the context, may or may not have been meant to be all-inclusive. Nevertheless, certain of the debaters’ lines of argument or appeals to conscience and mercy required the figure of a patriarch to make much sense to themselves and to the populace at large. The opponents of the bill never challenged the assumption, presumably content to argue from the standpoint of author-as-patriarch because it aided them in solidifying their portrait of the author as unfair “monopolist.” The proponents of Talfourd’s proposal, for their part, actively perpetuated

13. William Wordsworth, writing to Viscount Mahon on 11 April 1842 of Sir Robert Peel’s amendment to the final bill allowing that copyright should last seven years after the death of the author, states, “The result is lamentably short. . . . One point however is gained and that a very important one. The principle of postobit remuneration will be established. . . . Seven years are indeed only a beggarly allowance; why did not Sir R. propose at least nine? and then there would have been a year for each of the Nine Muses, Urania included!!!” (Letters 7:323). Wordsworth’s reference to the “principle” of postobit copyright remuneration is an acknowledgment that the 1814 change in copyright duration to twenty-eight years after the year of publication had, in many cases, created a situation of a practical manifestation of posthumous remuneration. The issue of the change from remuneration for the living author to de facto posthumous remuneration after the 1814 change deserves further inquiry (especially in relation to life-after-death narratives such as *Frankenstein* 1818). Unfortunately, that investigation cannot be attempted here.
the assumption because a masculine construction of the author harmonized with their appeals to the image of an ailing male head of the family expiring (in more ways than one), his near-destitute relatives gathered at the bedside, and taking with him the springs of not only literary genius but also, more importantly, profit. A masculine author also served better than did a female or nonspecifically sexed one another related aspect of the proponents’ argument, the proposed viewing of copyright as a posthumous legacy. A masculine conception aided their attempts at establishing the status of the author’s copyright as property that might be handed down, as was other property upon the death of the patriarch, from father to child.\textsuperscript{14}

Talfourd’s proposed extension of copyright incited considerable debate among the members of the House. Four and a half years of acrimonious parliamentary intriguing and obstruction ensued once the anti-copyright forces—made up mainly of those publishers involved in reprinting works originally published between 1750 and 1810—had had a chance to rally themselves against this threat to their livelihood.\textsuperscript{15} From late 1837 until early 1842 the House of Commons kept the issue shuffling back and forth between various stages of introduction, short deferral or long, and re-introduction. In the face of setback after setback, Talfourd exhibited remarkable fortitude. It was all the more unfortunate, then, that a version of the bill was made law only after he had been replaced in the House by the general election of 1841. Talfourd lost his seat immediately after his bill had suffered an especially disheartening defeat just on the point of being passed.

\textsuperscript{14} This conception of the author’s copyright devolved from the debates of the previous century. See Swartz, “Patrimony.” Swartz’s project in that essay is “to ask why eighteenth-century advocates of author’s copyright insistently represent the author as a Father who must be allowed the right to endow his children with a decent patrimony. Here the effort to clarify (and regulate) the legal and economic standing of the author can be seen to depend on a rhetoric of paternal obligations: unless the author-as-Father could claim an exclusive property in his work, it was frequently argued, his children would be denied a patrimony” (31). Swartz focuses especially on the 1769 case of \textit{Millar v. Taylor}, which “remains a landmark case because it signals the historic moment when copyright ceases to be thought of as a form of legal protection against ‘piracy,’ and becomes something more akin to modern copyright which embraces all of the author’s property interests in his work” (33). The majority of the four justices of the Court of King’s Bench in that case considered the author to have a common-law perpetual right in his property and they buttressed this opinion by deploying a rhetoric that elided literary property with other forms of legacy. Justice Willes stated, “He who engages in a laborious work (such, for instance, as Johnson’s Dictionary,) which may employ his whole life, will do it with more spirit, if, besides his own glory, he thinks it may be a provision for his family” (\textit{Millar v. Taylor} 218; in Swartz, “Patrimony” 37); and Lord Mansfield in his decision stated, “The property of the copy . . . may . . . go down from generation to generation, and possibly continue for ever,” (\textit{Millar v. Taylor} 251; in Swartz, “Patrimony” 37).

\textsuperscript{15} See Seville, \textit{Literary Copyright Reform}; Feather; and Woodmansee, “Cultural Work” for thorough summaries of Talfourd’s travails. For a discussion of the rhetorical strategies adopted by both parties in the debate, see Vanden Bossche.
through as the result of the unforeseen, and somewhat incomprehensible, entry into that debate of that famous man of letters and member for Edinburgh, Thomas Babington Macaulay—arguing for the other side. Macaulay made an especially impassioned and persuasive speech to the members that effectively killed the bill for that session. A major strand of his argument was the contention that “Copyright is monopoly, and produces all the effects which the general voice of mankind attributes to monopoly” (Macaulay 8:198). Subsequent debates would disclose that Macaulay had found objectionable not the spirit of the bill itself but rather simply the length of the proposed term, and as Talfourd had made the immoderate proclamation that he “despised” any half-hearted support, Macaulay had concluded that he could do nothing else but oppose the bill in toto. Obviously, along with Talfourd’s extraordinary stamina came also a rigidity of principle that, fatally, would not allow him to compromise on unwinnable points, most particularly on the posthumous sixty-year term that he was seeking. Viscount Mahon, one of the more stalwart supporters of Talfourd’s bill throughout that member’s many trials, took up the baton after the election and after a year or so, through adroit political maneuvering, had brought about the passage of a bill in March of 1842 extending the term of copyright to 42 years after the year of publication, or the life of the author plus seven years, whichever turned out to be longer. Mahon’s “victory” was welcomed by authors as a benefit to the profession throughout England. Not the least grateful of these, eventually, would be the aged Wilkie Collins who throughout his life would keep strict control over most of his copyrights, selling them only a few months before his death in 1889 for as much as he could obtain for the short time left on their duration.16

The proponents in the House of Commons specifically emphasized the need to adequately compensate the author for the pains undertaken in creating his text. Talfourd felt he had a legitimate reason for seeking extension of the term of copyright because he believed, as did many others,17 that the House of Lords’s decision in the case of Donaldson v. Becket in 1774 had unfairly stripped British authors of a perpetual right enjoyed hitherto, replacing it with a meager fourteen years, renewable for another fourteen years.

---

16. Clarke 5. See also Dickens’s letter to Collins of 27 January 1870 (a time when both were ailing, and perhaps also quarreling) in which the former somewhat grudgingly writes, “At your request, I can have no hesitation in stating for your satisfaction that the Copyright in any of your novels tales and articles which have appeared in the periodicals ‘Household Words’ and ‘All the Year Round’ was never purchased by the proprietors of those Periodicals” (Letters 12:472).

17. See for example the argument of the Chancellor of the Exchequer upon his introduction of the bill into the House of Lords for confirmation on May 26, 1842 (Hansard Parliamentary Debates, vol. 63, cols. 777–87).
should the author still be living. This drastic shortening of the term—in fact a serious reconceptualization of the concept of copyright as Mark Rose and others have shown—had come about as a result of two crucial issues having been decided about the Statute of Anne of 1710: (1) that it had been passed with the intention of limiting the perpetual right, and (2) that it had effectively overridden any perpetual right the author might wish to claim at common law.

Thus it is not surprising that Talfourd presented himself as championing the cause of a group the members of which had in the past been deprived of a substantial right, the right to endow their heirs or assigns with a legacy that would have lasted forever. In the first introduction of the bill into the House, Talfourd places the issue solidly within the framework of a generational succession to proprietorship, of the handing-down from father to child of the landed estate, by using the concept of inheritance to suggest a tie between what had been lost in the earlier decision of 1774, and that portion that might be partially restored in his day and age by the passage of his bill:

Although I see no reason why authors should not be restored to that inheritance which, under the name of protection and encouragement, has been taken from them . . . I propose still to treat [the issue] on the principle of compromise, and to rest satisfied with a fairer adjustment of the difference than the last act of Parliament affords. I shall propose . . . that the term of property in all works of learning, genius, and art, to be produced hereafter, or in which the statutable copyright subsists, shall be extended to sixty years, to be computed from the death of the author; which will at least enable him, while providing for the instruction and delight of distant ages, to contemplate that he shall leave in his works themselves some legacy to those for whom a nearer, if not a higher duty, requires him to provide. (Talfourd 8; emphasis added)

Talfourd employs terms that equate the author’s attachment to literary “property” with the proprietary attachment to land. Specifically, he attempts to transfer to the former connection the latter’s ability to pass from one person to another upon the death of the current proprietor—as would occur with an estate in fee—by transforming the past loss in Donaldson v. Becket, that

18. See Rose, Authors. See also Birrell, Patterson, and Saunders for discussions of the changes wrought upon copyright in Britain prior to 1842.

19. Talfourd comments, “the Statute of Anne substituted a short term in copyright for an estate in fee, and the rights of authors were delivered up to the mercy of succeeding Parliaments!” (4).
denied “inheritance,” into the “legacy” proposed by his bill. In 1834 Balzac had decried the lack of a posthumous legacy for French literary property in similar terms: “Mankind has perpetuated fortunes for the eldest sons of great families, for the youngest children of bankers; it has stipulated the hereditaryness of [property earned by] sweat; but it has disinherited the brains and vigils of writers” (65).

Talfourd realizes the need to situate copyright in terms highlighting its role as a solid form of property (the uncomfortable fit between “copyright” and “solid property” evincing the degree of ideological bridge-building required here). However, it was precisely this elision that had so disturbed Justice Yates in *Millar v. Taylor* in 1769. According to Rose, Yates was well aware of the elision surfacing in the opinions in that case, an elision that Yates took it on himself to question:

Joseph Yates . . . was probably the most penetrating legal thinker on the anti-common-law side of the question, and he understood quite clearly what was happening. The fallacy in the assertion that a literary composition could be regarded as property equivalent to an estate lay, he said, in “the equivocal use of the word ‘property’; which sometimes denotes the right of the person; (as when we say, ‘such a one has this estate, or that piece of goods’;) sometimes, the object itself.” Yates insisted on maintaining the distinction between a personal right and an object of property. He did not deny that a personal right might be incorporeal, but he did deny that anything incorporeal could be treated as property in the same sense as a house or land.20

20. Rose, “Author as Proprietor” 65. Yates’s words are from *Millar v. Taylor* 233. See Balzac attempting in 1834 the same elision in his implicit equation between “white paper” and the marks subsequently made on that paper: “Our country, which attends with scrupulous care to machines, to wheat harvests, to the silk and cotton industry, has no ears, has no eyes, has no hands when it comes to dealing with its intellectual treasures. . . . Listen, then. If, say, a merchant sends a bale of cotton from Le Havre to St Peters burg and some beggar sneaks up to it on a small boat and lays hands on it, that beggar will be hanged. In order to secure the free passage in every country of each such bale of cotton, of sugar, of white paper, of wine, the whole of Europe has created a common law right. Her ships, her cannons, her sailors, all her forces are at the orders of this bale of cargo. If a merchant ship is boarded by pirates, a general alarm is raised: all these forces are mobilized, and the pirates are soon caught and executed. Up until now it has only been poetry which has shed tears for the fate of a man for whom, if his play falls through at the theatre, the booing of the audience is like a rope hanging from a beam. But what about a book, then? Oh! a book is treated just like a pirate would be treated. Everyone rushes to get at a book: it is avidly sought after, it is carried off in its swaddling-clothes, when it is still in proof-sheets; it is already counterfeited even before it has been made. The pirate can use his genius to try to escape execution, but the genius with which a book is marked only serves to make it easily discovered by its executioners. Germany, Italy, England, France extend their greedy hands towards the book, for, since this malversation *sic* is universal, France has been forced to imitate the other
Half a century later the elision that had so disturbed Yates would again be surfacing—actually the time-honored strategy of denigrating breaking emerging once more—this time in Parliament, once again deployed in defense of the author’s natural proprietary right over his creation.

In 1774, in the House of Lords’s consideration of the question of literary property in the famous case of Donaldson v. Becket—effectively the appeal, and overturning, of Millar v. Taylor—it had not been taken for granted that authors wanted or even in fact possessed a monetary property in their works; for after all, as Lord Camden argued, did not true authors write out of a general desire for glory or praise, manifestly disdaining any base monetary motive?

Glory is the reward of science, and those who deserve it scorn all meaner views. . . . It was not for gain, that Bacon, Newton, Milton, Locke, instructed and delighted the world; it would be unworthy such men to traffic with a dirty bookseller for so much a sheet of letter-press. (“The Speeches of the Lords” in Cases of the Appellants 54)

This issue broached by Lord Camden was to become one of the most heated points of contention in the debates over Talfourd’s bill sixty years later. Arguments in the spirit of Camden’s, that authors wrote for glory rather than money, were both reviled by defenders of the bill asking how authors were to “live on air” and praised by their opponents who, ignoring the different system of remuneration most pervasive in the era of Bacon and Milton, the patronage system, countered that authors had been happy to write even before copyright had existed.

Lord Mahon, at that time merely a supporter of Talfourd’s side of the argument rather than its leader, is reported as having spoken quite effectively—and in terms that will resonate with our reading of Collins’s narrative—on behalf of the bill on February 19, 1840:

[The author] should be supplied with the natural motive and natural reward for exertion; namely, that the harvest of his toil should hereafter be reaped by his children. It had been argued that the love of fame was sufficient motive, and that the attainment of fame was sufficient reward. He (Lord Mahon) did not deny the power of that motive, or the brilliancy of that reward. But would ask, did they apply that rule to other cases? . . . Why . . . with
writers alone, attempt to dissever the two gifts of fame and fortune? Why, then, should literary men, and literary men only, be confined to the empty honours of celebrity? He asked for authors only this—give them what is their own—give them what their own brains have conceived, and their own right hands have written—give them by legal enactment what they already hold by every moral right.\(^{21}\) (Hansard Parliamentary Debates, vol. 52, cols. 408–9; emphasis added)

Mahon here draws a connection—a not at all uncommon one in the days before computer voice-dictation—between writing and the work of the hands, a connection highlighting, that is, the role the author plays in the production of the book. The close proximity between this reference to the production of the hands and the earlier reference to the author’s “harvest” suggests an image of the author as farmer or tiller of the soil, as laborer. Once again connecting text and land, late in the copyright debates Mahon refers to Backbite’s line mentioned earlier to characterize the shift in printing from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s: “The demand for splendid books has ceased. . . . Before the beginning of the present century, Mr. Sheridan remarked that the manner in which the poetical works of that period were printed made them look ‘like a rivulet of text meandering through a meadow of margin’; but year by year cheaper editions are published.”\(^{22}\) Mahon’s rhetorical rendering of the author’s labor as a metaphoric tilling of the land in these two cases, as the “harvest” that his children should later come properly to reap, puts back into effect a latent connection at the heart of the etymology of the word “character.” Etymologists of English note that “character” not only signifies one’s personality and/or a letter, as in A, B, C, etc., but also derives from the Greek for the act of cutting furrows in or plowing the soil.\(^{23}\) Mahon’s rhetoric here asks us to see the author as a laborer sowing seeds, or making furrows across a page, so that that author and his family might later eat, rather than to see him as a type of high-class,

\(^{21}\) Balzac also connected writing with harvests: “[France] looks on without shame as the descendants of Corneille, all of them poor, gather round the statue of Corneille, which has created wealth in all the barns of this country, which brings forth harvests that no patch of bad weather can threaten, which over the centuries will continue to make rich actors, booksellers, paper manufacturers, bookbinders, and scholarly commentators” (64).

\(^{22}\) 6 April 1842; Hansard Parliamentary Debates, vol. 61, col. 1358.

\(^{23}\) Rowland Jones notes that “character” and “letter” both possess an etymological tie to land: “by character is meant a real representation of nature, and by letter a call or sound upon nature; litera being from al-tir, a call upon the land, and character from ac-ar-tir, action upon the land” (entry for “Character” in Jones). Klein suggests “character” derives from the Hebrew harash for “he engraved, plowed” and the Akkadian erushu for “to till the ground” (127).
intellectual dabbler in the arts or amanuensis of God who has neither need nor right to profit by his literary works, an image on which Lord Camden, implicitly through the reference to Milton, would seem to be reliant. We are here offered by Mahon an early example of an image that would later in the century be taken up whole-heartedly by several diverse groups interested in strengthening the author–work tie: the image of the author as working-man.24

Mahon’s strategy of rhetorically equating literary creations with land had an effect. The reaction in Blackwood’s to the passage of his Act emphasized precisely this connection. After remarking that “it is a disgrace to British legislation . . . that copyright should ever have been the subject of a question” and acknowledging that “we have no doubt that the time will come, when this very circumstance will be quoted as evidence of the barbarism of the nineteenth century,” the noted lawyer and historian Archibald Alison asks,

why is the labour of the philosopher to be less valued and protected than the labour of the peasant? If a fellow with a spade in his hand shuts out the sea from half a dozen acres, he may transmit them to his remotest generation. . . . If one great object of every man of virtue and feeling is to leave his family at least above the privations which belong to poverty, why is the attainment of an object so laudable and so important even to the community, to be prohibited to the intellectual part of mankind, while it is fully given to the more drudging and unintelligent? (634–35)

Alison’s commentary concludes with an avowal of confidence in the future: “However, all these anomalies will be rectified in time. The brains of a man will be as much protected as his boots; and robbery will be no more sanctioned in the instance of a new Iliad, or a new Paradise Lost, than in that of the good-will of a cobbler’s stall, or the fee-simple of a potato field” (635–36). Here the oft-cited example in the literary critical debates of Milton’s apparently exploitative contract for the sale of Paradise Lost for £5 (as well

24. One such group was the young men surrounding Dickens. It is appropriate that Talfourd should have been the dedicatee, when it appeared in volume form, of The Pickwick Papers (1837), that early work by that author who would do so much to popularize the image of the Victorian author as laborer. In praising Talfourd for his efforts to secure to authors and “their descendants a permanent interest in the copyright of their works,” Dickens writes, “many a widowed mother and orphan child, who would otherwise reap nothing from the fame of departed genius but its too frequent legacy of poverty and suffering, will bear, in their altered condition, higher testimony to the value of your labours than the most lavish encomiums from lip or pen could ever afford” (Pickwick Papers 39).
as the purportedly resultant penury of his granddaughter) is reinflected to a different use. Indeed, the provisions in the new Act and their establishment of a model for future Acts would make certain that, if anything, the authorial Paradise would some day be Found.

A decade after these particular rhetorical battles had been concluded, what Collins would gain by his re-conflation, in his turn, of the right to the ownership of literary property with the right to the ownership of land would be the solid claim, as proprietor, to the possession of his writings, those writings having now become, at least metaphorically, as sacrosanct as landed property. Collins brings about this conflation by adopting and perpetuating an ideology that works toward the reification of the object of literary property, “solidifying” that incorporeal and inherently disseminable entity in the more stable shape of a symbolic landscape. Thus the proprietary right to literary property regains its own lost inheritance, perpetuity, by being implicitly tied to the perpetual right characteristic of the ownership of land. Collins, by centering his narrative’s concerns on the issues of authorship and landed inheritance—conjoined in the self-actuating figure of the always already bereft second son who chooses to write—lobbies his readers toward seeing literary “property” to be, no doubt to Justice Yates’s undying consternation, not just a right but also a thing.

My purpose in producing these quotations from Parliament is not to propose that Talfourd and Mahon are playing etymological games. Indeed, foremost on their agendas must simply have been the swaying of the rest of the members of the House of Commons through the purport of their speeches, as opposed to through clever word-play (although Talfourd did have a penchant for interspersing lines from Wordsworth’s poetry and prose throughout his discourse in deference to that behind-the-scenes proponent of the bill). However, it is my contention that Collins in Basil is—as will be seen in the next section—playing etymological games and doing so for a purpose very similar to the purpose motivating the speeches of the parliamentarians. In Basil Collins depicts both an image of the high-class dabbler in fiction, the effete son of the upper classes, being transformed by certain sensational circumstances into a strong-armed ruffian—a type of condensed mapping of the evolution of the English literary artist from inspired aris-

25. See Lindenbaum on “Milton’s Contract,” and Macaulay commenting that “[a]s often as this bill has been under discussion, the fate of Milton’s granddaughter has been brought forward by the advocates of monopoly. My honorable and learned friend [Talfourd] has repeatedly told the story with great eloquence and effect” (8:203).

26. See Swartz, “Wordsworth” for examples of Talfourd’s Word(sworth)-play. For Wordsworth’s interest in the bill, see Wordsworth, Letters, vols. 6 and 7 passim; Erickson; Noyes; Ward; and Zall.
tocrat to anonymous but industrious garret dweller—and an instance of the chaste artist inspired from “on high” becoming a terrestrial, as well as sexual, sower of seeds. This description brings to mind a specific contemporary literary character who exemplifies these same qualities and undergoes these same transformations, the sexual/textual disseminator Nemo (Captain James Hawdon) of *Bleak House* (serialized March 1852–September 1853), a book whose early part-publications influenced the construction of *Basil*. Catherine Peters notes that Collins spent the summer of 1852 with the Dickens household at Dover:

> Dickens’ orderly and self-disciplined routine, combined with his apparently inexhaustible energy, set an example Wilkie tried to live up to. “Our life here is as healthy and happy as life can be—work in the morning—long walks—sea bathing—early hours—famous meals—merry evenings—make up the various fuel with which we feed the fire of life.” But he found “The sea air acts on me as if it was all distilled from laudanum,” and after one of Dickens’ famous fifteen-mile walks he was too sleepy even to write a letter. . . . Dickens was writing *Bleak House*, and reading the latest chapters to the household before they were published. . . . Wilkie, fired by his example, finished his novel on 15 September. (113)

Here Collins, under the strong guiding hand of Dickens, transforms from the privileged son of a famous English painter to the working man able and willing to put forth the physical and mental effort necessary to support himself and his household. These transformations—both the one effected in life by the example set by Dickens and the one exemplified in the narrative by Basil’s turn to the dark woman in the dream—of the literary artist from effete, inspired dabbler to active, energetic working-man serve in Collins’s mind, at least at this time, to solidly stamp the artist’s copyright on his work and concomitantly to establish that work as an object of property. In Parliament, what Talfourd and Mahon were trying to do through their use of analogies that would implicitly link copyright with more solid forms of property, such as harvests and landed legacies, was to solidify an image of the author as proprietor. It is no mere coincidence that a decade later

27. This undertext of the author-protagonist’s transforming in class position explains Collins’s apparent overturning of the normal Gothic conventions, noted by Pykett: “Basil is an early example of the way in which Collins’s modernization of Gothic reverses some of its key terms, including those of class. Whereas traditional Gothic habitually puts its middle- or upper-class heroine at the mercy of a sinister ecclesiastical or aristocratic power, Collins’s modern Gothic entraps its upper-class male protagonist in a secular lower-middle-class world” (*Wilkie Collins* 114).
Collins would be putting into play a similar conception, for all three of these figures, Talfourd, Mahon, and Collins, were participating in a cultural transformation through which the relationship between the author-proprietor and his work was being consistently strengthened and the nature of the literary work increasingly “solidified” through the active promotion of settling and the tacit denigration of breaking, all in an attempt to render the literary ownership of the work an inviolable right of property.

Playing with Words and Etymologies

Having situated Basil’s dream within the particular context of the contemporary copyright extension debates, we can now look at the rest of the narrative, scrutinizing it with an interest especially as to its references to textuality. The first feature to be noted about the remainder of Collins’s quite sensational story is, surprisingly, a rather mundane aspect of its narrative composition: the play with etymologies. Etymological play was a constant throughout Collins’s career. To give one example not unrelated to the narrative of Basil: on the day of reckoning for the villain of the novel written immediately after Basil, Hide and Seek (1854), Mat Grice reveals the hidden, nefarious character of the seemingly model-citizen Mr. Zachary Thorpe, the elder, by inscribing one more name at the bottom of an address “eulogizing his character” (Hide 402). This testimonial—described as “beautifully written on the fairest white paper” (405)—has been presented that day to Thorpe by the religious society of which he has been a member for many years:

[Mat] handed the paper to Mr. Thorpe, bearing inscribed on it the name of MARY GRICE.

Read that name, said Mat.

Mr. Thorpe looked at the characters traced by the pencil. His face changed instantly—he sank down into the chair—one faint cry burst from his lips—then he was silent.

Low, stifled, momentary as it was, that cry proclaimed him to be the man. He was self-denounced by it even before he cowered down, shuddering in the chair, with both his hands pressed convulsively over his face. (408)

The “characters traced by the pencil” of Mat Grice are not just the M-A-R-Y, etc., of his sister’s name but of course also reveal Thorpe’s well-hidden and
scandalous *character*. The man who Thorpe is revealed to be is that Arthur Carr who twenty-three years before had seduced and abandoned the pregnant, unmarried Mary who, having fled from her home in shame, later died during child-birth. This scene, as well as the rest of the narrative, plays with the double meaning of the word “character,” a word that of course can refer to both handwriting (lettering) and personality.

This tie between character and characters is also apparent in the earlier narrative of *Basil*, the association being brought out perhaps most forcefully in the scene in which Basil’s father, horrified by his marriage and by Margaret’s subsequent actions, expels him from the family by tearing Basil’s page from a familial record book:

> Here, then, if I still acknowledge you to be my son . . . must be written such a record of dishonour and degradation as has never yet defiled a single page of this book—here, the foul stain of your marriage, and its consequences, must be admitted to spread over all that is pure before it, and to taint to the last whatever comes after. This shall not be. . . . I know you now, only as an enemy to me and to my house. . . . In this record your place is destroyed—and destroyed for ever. Would to God I could tear the past from my memory, as I tear the leaf from this book! (*Basil* 203)

Character quite literally equals handwriting, or copy-book characters, in this family scrap-book containing pages headed “sometimes by copies of the Baron’s effigy on his tombstone” (201). Here Basil’s father expresses, both through the fact of having a book that represents his family and in the act of tearing Basil out of it, a desire for the collapsing of two levels, his “real” (for us the narratorial) and his literal. The past and the future of the family are a text from which one can easily tear things and people.

However, “character” is not the only word to have its etymology troped upon in the narrative of *Basil*. The other significant etymological manipulation in the book occurs with the word “manuscript.” This word combines the Latin for hand, *manus*, with the Latin for writing, *scribere*. Of course, having suggested this etymology, I must distinguish it from that other root for words beginning with M-A-N: the Old High German for quite simply “man” as in *human* or *Norman*, meaning man from Normandy or Northman, a genealogy that, if we do not remember it, as both Mr. Sherwin and Basil seem not to in trusting Robert Mannion in his relationship with Margaret, 28. As does also *The Woman in White*, in which at the climax of the narrative Count Fosco flees London leaving Walter Hartright with his written confession, that is—reinfecting Fosco’s line from Sheridan referred to in an earlier footnote—in which he goes, leaving his character(s) behind him.
places us at the mercy of the evil villain of the story. Sherwin, whose “man-
aging man” (bringing together both options) Mannion is, would appear to
read our villain’s name simply along the manus, Latin rather than German,
line of descent. Mannion is simply an extension of himself, his right-hand
man: “I can tell you there’s not a house of business in London has such a
managing man as he is: he’s my factotum—my right hand, in short; and my
left too, for the matter of that” (Basil 115).
Robert Mannion is no one’s right hand, and no one’s left either; he’s
all man, as his illicit actions will come to prove—in stark contrast it would
appear to the preciously-named Basil. At one point late in the story, Mar-
garet, caught up in her Typhus-induced delirium, believing she is speaking
to Mannion but really speaking to Basil, says,

You know I like you, because I must like you; because I can’t help it. It’s
no use saying hush: I tell you he can’t hear us, and can’t see us. He can see
nothing; you make a fool of him, and I make a fool of him. . . . Why didn’t
you come back from France in time, and stop it all? Why did you let me
marry him? A nice wife I’ve been to him, and a nice husband he has been
to me—a husband who waits a year! Ha! ha! he calls himself a man, doesn’t
he? A husband who waits a year! (Basil 294)

Mannion’s manliness was emphasized to an even greater extent in the sen-
tence originally following “I can’t help it” in the first edition: “You are a
man; a strong, daring, conquering man: he’s a——” (Basil, 1852 edition,
2:177). (This sentence was excised by Collins when he revised the text in
1862, undoubtedly out of deference to the respect owed to mid-Victorian
propriety by a now very successful author.) The almost unlimited access to
his young daughter Sherwin allows Mannion, including after-dinner teach-
ing sessions under the fairly unobservant eye of her mother, would seem
to imply that he feels that the forty-year-old Mannion must have lost all
his “manly” urges years ago. This is a miscalculation of the same order as
that one made in Hide and Seek when Joshua Grice failed to exert the strict
control over his daughter Mary urged on him by his sister Joanna: “Next
to his blind trust in his daughter, because he was fond of her, was his blind
trust in this stranger, because the gentleman’s manners were so quiet and
kind, and because he sent us presents of expensive flowers to plant in our
garden” (Hide 272). The reprehensible Carr was of course in that instance
sowing seeds—as he would be doing again later, only then with fatal reper-
cussions. Mr. Grice’s mistake ended up costing him his daughter’s life. Mr.
Sherwin’s miscalculation will similarly end up costing him his daughter,
and this time we will have not a bereaved brother revamping the villain’s testimonial or “character,” but a bereaved husband-in-waiting revamping the villain’s character, or face, outside the hotel of assignation.

Appended to the autobiographical manuscript that Basil will have completed before we reach the end of the book is a letter written by our narrator eight years after most of the action in the story has concluded. The letter is addressed by Basil to his friend Dr. Bernard, telling of the former’s reconciliation with his father and of that father’s recent death. In the letter Basil grants Bernard permission to publish his “manuscript.” The following passage from the letter discloses not only the fictionality of all the names appearing in the story but also implicitly refers to the etymology of that word:

While my father lived, I could not suffer a manuscript in which he was represented . . . as separating himself in the bitterest hostility from his own son, to be made public property . . . Still I am not answering your question:—Am I now willing to permit the publication of my narrative, provided all names and places mentioned in it remained concealed, and I am known to no one but yourself, Ralph, and Clara, as the writer of my own story? I reply that I am willing. In a few days, you will receive the manuscript by a safe hand.29 (Basil 338–39)

While “Basil,” “Clara,” and “Mannion” are disclosed here to be not “real” names, this second-order fictionality does nothing to disturb their underlying allegorical import, indeed, instead only heightening it. We might see not only the reference to “a safe hand” to be suggesting the manus root of “manuscript” but the rather redundant stress that Basil lays on the fact that he has written an autobiography, that he is “the writer of [his] own story,” to be punningly asserting the tie between him and the possession and ownership of his writing. This remark is deployed to contrast with the earlier reference to the manuscript becoming upon publication a type of “public property.”

Though it had been Basil who in the early dream had gone off with the dark woman to the secret recesses among the trees, in the story Mannion is the one who actually enjoys Margaret’s favors. As a result, Basil, perhaps not a lover but certainly when enraged a writer and fighter both, “mark[s]” (Basil 275) Mannion, writing on his face by hurling him down on the road-

29. Collins repeats this reference later in his career when he has Ozias Midwinter present the written description of Allan Armadale’s dream to the Manx doctor Mr. Hawbury: “I beg your pardon,” he said, as he offered the doctor the manuscript with his own hand” (Armadale 140).
stones of the newly macadamized street. Mannion’s face—described earlier by Basil as “a sealed book” (117)—having been mutilated and an eye put out, his character is deformed. This alteration is analogically represented afterwards by the “irregular” characters (194) exhibited in the handwriting of the threatening letter Mannion writes to Basil from his hospital bed. This deformation, the result of the two having gone mano-a-mano, is characterized by Mannion as the product of Basil’s labors. He asks at Margaret’s funeral, “Do you know me for Robert Mannion? . . . Do you know the work of your own hands, now you see it?” (303). The passage that precedes this question, besides markedly confirming the critic Tamar Heller’s assertions of an influence stemming from Frankenstein (60), reminds us that Mannion’s face has become the bad manuscript that haunts its author everywhere and forever:

The first sight of that appalling face, with its ghastly discoloration of sickness, its hideous deformity of feature, its fierce and changeless malignity of expression glaring full on me in the piercing noonday sunshine . . . struck me speechless where I stood, and has never left me since. I must not, I dare not, describe that frightful sight; though it now rises before my imagination, vivid in its horror as on the first day when I saw it—though it moves hither and thither before me fearfully, while I write; though it lowers at my window, a noisome shadow on the radiant prospect of earth, and sea, and sky, whenever I look up from the page I am now writing towards the beauties of my cottage view.

“Do you know me for Robert Mannion?” he repeated. “Do you know the work of your own hands, now you see it?” (302–3; emphasis added)

Basil’s manuscript is everywhere. Even a turn to the prospect, to the landscape around him, would seem not to afford an escape from the sight of the work of his hands. Here the etymological root of Mannion’s name would seem to have changed character along with the change in his face since “Man”nion’s one-time manly face has become Basil’s “hand”iwork, while, at the same time, through an associative bridging involving the terms “character” and “manuscript,” the landscape around Basil would seem to have become conflated with his manuscript. In order for this equation between land and manuscript to work on us effectively, however, we must first be successfully indoctrinated into what I am calling “copyright ideology,” the idea that texts themselves might be possessed and bequeathed in the same way that other forms of property were in Collins’s time.
Textual Repossessions

Highlighting the emphasis on textuality that will pervade the entirety of Collins’s oeuvre, both Basil and our eponymous hero’s manuscript that largely makes up that narrative jointly begin with the question “What am I now about to write?” In answer, the subsequent lines are characterized by our narrator as his family legacy. Basil launches this history of his sadly mis-directed affections in the hope that it will have good effects on the succeeding generations of his family:

I hope that, one day, [my narrative] may be put to some warning use. I am now about to relate the story of an error. . . . [M]y plain and true record will show that this error was not committed altogether without excuse. When these pages are found after my death, they will perhaps be calmly read and gently judged, as relics solemnized by the atoning shadows of the grave. Then, the hard sentence against me may be repented of; the children of the next generation of our house may be taught to speak charitably of my memory, and may often, of their own accord, think of me kindly in the thoughtful watches of the night. (Basil 1; emphasis added)

Basil is here handing down the lessons learned as a result of the mistakes made in his early life and characterizing the narrative in which they are recounted as a provision for his descendants to profit by, albeit, in this case, only spiritually. Nevertheless, we are not far here from the rhetoric of patrimony, referred to earlier, employed by the Victorian parliamentarians in their prolonged fight to extend the duration of copyright.

It is not surprising that the legacy of a second son should be at issue here as the concept of “congenital” dispossession—especially of the author at the hands of language—will be a central aspect of Collins’s major narratives, especially of The Moonstone. In Basil we see early stirrings of this type of thinking as the author is analogized, by way of the examples of the main characters Mannion and Basil, to an aristocrat who has always already fallen in station. Mannion’s fall, the result of his father’s transgression, is described as at one point having led to his working as a “hack-author of the lowest degree” (Basil 231). In Basil’s case we have someone who also, albeit in this case as a result of birth order, has to encounter and acknowledge an inherent inadequacy. Even before the beginning of the narrative Basil has been laboring through writing to regain a “lost” class position; later in Collins’s career the author-figure will be working toward regaining control of
a lost text or fugitive meanings. The author for Collins is in a sense always a second son. Unlike the situation in other Collins novels, most notably *No Name* (1862), this time it is not so much a matter of inheriting or not inheriting money but of, quite simply, inheriting or not inheriting land. If one is not going to inherit it, one has to create it for oneself.\(^{30}\) This is what Basil, however improbably, does, by creating a manuscript. Thus he reinvokes, in the converse direction, the Victorian parliamentarians’ analogy between texts and land, an analogy most clearly encapsulated in Lord Mahon’s suggestion that authors had been deprived of their legacies and had their proper “harvests” taken away from them and their children. Basil is constantly preoccupied with creating the landed inheritance that his position as a second son has always already denied him. Collins will reinterpre
t this situation in *The Moonstone*. It is a short step from this dispossession due to birth order and that dispossession resulting from the author’s agreement to contract with the vagaries of the breaking function of iterability.

There is another benefit to be derived from Basil’s literary labors, this time in the psychological realm. The narrative of *Basil* implies that a certain solidity of character is a natural offshoot or product of the act of writing, for, as the manuscript pages pile up, Basil’s personality comes itself to be more and more unified. The fact that Basil has been estranged from his father and thrown out of home and family, in other words, multiply dispossessed, exhibits its effects through Basil’s inability as a narrator to be quite, as Jenny Bourne Taylor puts it, “self-possessed.” Taylor’s reading finds the trauma of Basil’s having been disowned to be expressing itself thereafter in something akin to a split-personality disorder.\(^{31}\) This fragmentation in Basil’s personality shows up in the various narratorial stances he adopts during the

---

30. Tamar Heller, in her exceptional study *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, contends that Basil takes up writing as a profession in response to his father’s dispossession of him (69). This interpretation, however, does not account for the fact that Basil has been writing all along, even before being officially and sensationall disinherted. Specifically, he has been writing a “historical romance” (along the lines, one gets the impression, of Collins’s first published novel *Antonina; or the Fall of Rome*), for which he has been away doing research in Italy before the narrative-time of *Basil* begins. Indeed, the part of the inheritance most dear to Basil is that one that as a second son, unless he had taken up murder as a profession, he was never going to have had anyway. The significance for Basil of this congenital dispossession is made clear when our hero explicitly states that upon his return home from college “it was thought necessary, as I was a younger son and could inherit none of the landed property of the family, except in the case of my brother’s dying without children, that I should belong to a profession” (*Basil* 4). That dispossession by birth order—the symbolic significance of this order only growing when we note that it is the opposite of Collins’s own real-life situation—is again made explicitly evident in the meditations on Ralph’s undeserving but favored position in Part I, Chapter IV.

31. Taylor’s efforts in her chapter on *Basil* are dedicated to disclosing the various ways in which “the narrative voice” in the book “fractures” (*Secret Theatre* 74).
course of his telling of the story. At first he is a naive Basil. Then, after the disclosure of his “half-wife” Margaret’s adultery, he appears as a knowledgeable—and fallen—Basil. Both of these Basils, however, have been all along contained within, impersonated by, a third Basil, that one hiding from the vindictive, disfigured Mannion in Cornwall while writing the manuscript of his autobiography. This last persona renders that one of naiveté taken up in the first pages of the book quite the departure from the actual situation of the fully recovered narrator. So, for Taylor, Basil is undoing, through this gradual recovery from his narratorial self-estrangements, the psychological effects of his disinherittance and his removal from the family. He is, through a form of, it would seem, the “writing cure,” working toward the goal of “repossession” on various levels.

I would emphasize one movement toward “repossession” that Taylor does not explicitly mention—that movement toward the repossession of the autobiographical text itself by its purported author, and owner, as a direct result of the solidification of that author’s personality. For my study, it is quite significant that the moment when Basil’s narration catches up with him, the moment when he becomes once more self-possessed, is also the moment when he highlights both the manuscript/work-of-the-hands connection and his own role in the creation of the text:

October 19th.—My retrospect is finished. I have traced the history of my errors and misfortunes, of the wrong I have done and the punishment I have suffered for it, from the past to the present time.

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. (Basil 311; emphasis added)

Through this gradual coordination of various Basils via our hero’s act of penning characters (letters), “character” comes to recapture a range of possible meanings: handwriting, personality, fictional entity, and projected autobiographical entity. The lack of self-possession that Taylor identifies is gradually healed through the act of writing; Basil’s difficult work of seeding his handwriting over page after page of manuscript allows him to effect the unification of his “split-personality.”

As the retrospect catches up with its time of writing, Basil’s “real” and manuscript worlds come to coincide. The conflation of the phenomenal and the textual evident here naturally takes on a good deal of importance in a book that would be implicitly lobbying to demonstrate how valuable writing
is to its author. Collins in this novel implicitly asserts ownership over the
text he is creating, tacitly suggesting that his handwriting and characters are
as intimate a reflection of him as his character or personality. The narrative
of Basil is, by means of the repeated language games deployed in it—not the
least of which being the conjunction of the narrative level and the real level
in the name shared by the work and its protagonist/narrator—dedicated to
bringing about the collapse of the author with his text, thereby strengthen-
ing the tie between the author and the “work” he creates.

**Manuscript’s End as Land’s End**

A particularly striking example of the strengthening of this proprietary tie is
the way in which at the end of the narrative, through a figurative doubling,
England literally becomes Basil’s, the landless second son’s, manuscript. The
narrative’s transformations of manuscript into land, as well as, conversely,
of land into manuscript, have all along been necessitated by Basil’s position
in the birth order. As Basil is the “spare,” the *secundo* in the fundamentally
imbalanced system of primogeniture, he most likely, unless he, like the later
characters Gwilt and perhaps Fosco, takes up murder as a hobby, is not going
to inherit the family lands. So, he must necessarily make his own legacy, a
task he has embarked on even before the necessity precipitated by his force-
ful disinherance has come upon him. He will make that land out of his
imagination and the labor of his pen. Collins has Basil emphasize, continu-
ally, at the beginning of the story his older brother Ralph’s unfitness for
assuming proprietorship over the family lands, an unfitness quite in contrast
with Basil’s more natural, because more intimate and more organic, tie to
the work of his hands. For example, Basil writes,

> When a family is possessed of large landed property, the individual of that
family who shows least interest in its welfare . . . is often that very indi-
vidual who is to succeed to the family inheritance—the eldest son. . . . It
was impossible to make Ralph comprehend and appreciate his position, as

32. Talfourd had had recourse to the example of the laws against slander and libel in his appeal
on behalf of a longer term of copyright, saying, “[i]s the interest itself so refined—so ethereal—that
you cannot regard it as property, because it is not palpable to sense or to feeling? . . . If so, why do you
protect moral character as a man’s most precious possession, and compensate the party who suffers in
that character unjustly by damages? Has this possession any existence half so palpable as the author’s
right in the printed creation of his brain?” (27 February 1839; *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 45,
col. 927).
he was desired to comprehend and appreciate it. The steward gave up in despair all attempts to enlighten him about the extent, value, and management of the estates he was to inherit. (11–12)

Not only does Basil seem obsessed with Ralph’s landed inheritance, the younger son would also seem to be mesmerized by the older one’s ill-suited-ness to the role of proprietor, painting as he does here the picture of the stereotypical carefree eldest son—the son who can afford to be carefree thanks to that system of inheritance that allows that the first male bud gets all the leaves while the second must make his own. This stereotype is employed by Basil to contrast all the more starkly with his own serious-minded desire to work, and to labor, at making that land that is more dearly bought than inherited land, the estate made by the work of one’s hands, the sweat of one’s brow, and the scratching of one’s pen.

It should be kept in mind that at the time that Basil is writing this he has been disinherited and thrown out of the family home by his father. That is, Basil has found it necessary to write not only as a result of birth order but also as a result of family circumstances. As Dickens puts it in his valedictory letter to Collins congratulating him on the fashioning of Basil, the novel shows “throughout . . . [that] you have taken great pains with it . . . [that] you have ‘gone at it’ with a perfect knowledge of the jolter-headedness of the conceited idiots who suppose that volumes are to be tossed off like pancakes, and that any writing can be done without the utmost application, the greatest patience, and the steadiest energy of which the writer is capable.”33 This compliment to our young author might extend to our young narrator and autobiographer Basil as well, given the degree to which the narrative stresses Basil’s serious-minded dedication to his chosen profession. Dedication being the subject at issue in Dickens’s comment, it is appropriate that he should be seen to be bestowing in this letter his imprimatur upon an assertion of Collins’s own, made in the appropriately titled “Letter of Dedication” to the first edition of Basil:

My only desire, in writing this letter, is to claim credit for one humble, work-a-day merit to which anybody may attain by trying—the merit of having really taken pains to do my best. . . . The mob of ladies and gentlemen who play at writing is increasing, in our day, to formidable proportions. With every new season appear additional numbers of the holiday authors, who sit down to write a book as they would sit down to a game

at cards—leisurely-living people who coolly select as an amusement “to kill time,” an occupation which can only be pursued, even creditably, by the patient, uncompromising, reverent devotion of every moral and intellectual faculty, more or less, which a human being has to give. . . . To escape classification with the off-hand professors of this sort of off-hand authorship, by the homely but honourable distinction of being workers and not players at their task, has really become an object of importance, now-a-days, for those who follow Literature as a study and respect it as a science.\(^\text{34}\) (Basil, 1852 edition, 1:xv–xvii; emphasis added)

Here Collins prefigures the so very stark contrast to come in the narrative between Basil and Ralph, that one between the landless and the landed, between the worker dedicated to letters and the player dedicated to the pursuit of other desires.

Near the close of the novel, Basil, with Mannion pursuing him like a living curse, ends up in Cornwall, most significantly, near Land’s End. Basil is hiding there in a cottage near a small fishing village. Mannion’s discovery of him and his subsequent agitations among the villagers cause them to shun and finally to drive Basil from his place of residence. During a stormy and foggy morning Basil ends up walking along the English coast on his way to a new village, convinced, quite rightly as it will turn out, that Mannion is still pursuing him. This melodramatic gothic pursuit is set on a fog-bound coast offering the peril of Basil’s not being able to rely on his sight to see the cliff’s edge, to see where the land ends and the fall into the raging Atlantic begins. Basil, having only his ears to guide him by, keeps the sound of the ocean always on his right hand but then realizes that the sea is to be heard on both sides of him, for he has unknowingly walked out onto a promontory jutting into the ocean. Tunneling through a massive, wall-like section of this promontory is a large hole that Dorothy Goldman in her explanatory notes relates to a “geographic phenomenon near Kynance Cove” called “The Devil’s Throat” that Collins had described in his early travelogue Rambles beyond Railways: or, Notes in Cornwall Taken A-Foot (1851). On his walking tour Collins had encountered “a wide, tunnelled opening . . . a black, gaping hole, into the bottom of which the sea is driven through the aptly-named ‘Devil’s Throat.’” The opening of the abyss on the promontory is a

\(^{34}\) Giving Dickens his due with respect to the question of priority on this standpoint, we might recall in David Copperfield (1850) David’s allusion to the painstaking efforts expended in his literary labors: “I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady, plain, hard-working qualities, and hope to gain its end” (672).
dangerous place as the rocks rise “wild, jagged, and precipitous, all around it.”\textsuperscript{35} The pursuing Mannion also journeys out onto this promontory, yet he is not so lucky as Basil in climbing past the abyss, precisely because of his extreme desire for vengeance. The work, or more properly unworkability, of Mannion’s hands is prominently displayed in the description of his end:

[Mannion] stopped—looked up and saw me watching him—raised his hand—and shook it threateningly in the air. The ill-calculated violence of his action, in making that menacing gesture, destroyed his equilibrium—he staggered—tried to recover himself—swayed half round where he stood—then fell heavily backward, right on to the steep shelving rock.

The wet sea-weed slipped through his fingers, as they madly clutched at it. He struggled frantically to throw himself towards the side of the declivity, slipping further and further down it at every effort. Close to the mouth of the abyss, he sprang up as if he had been shot. A tremendous jet of spray hissed out upon him at the same moment. . . . For one instant, I saw two livid and bloody hands tossed up against the black walls of the hole, as he dropped into it. (\textit{Basil} 325–26)

The providential hand of water turns out to be stronger than the force of Mannion’s hand-hold as he tries unsuccessfully to find a purchase on what will become in a sense his tombstone. Here, it must be remembered, Mannion is not just falling down a hole in a promontory into the Atlantic; he is in fact falling off the extreme edge of England, falling off Land’s End.

In sympathy with Mannion’s fall off the land’s edge, almost immediately afterwards, Basil falls off what might be called the “edge” of his reason. Having “traced” (\textit{Basil} 326) his way off the promontory and to a nearby village, he falls seriously ill, not only courting delirium, but also—horror of horrors in a Collins novel—losing control of his text. The narrative suggests through a series of asterisked breaks that Basil is, in a manner similar to Mannion’s failed attempts, losing his own “hand-hold” and falling into what an unknown editor in a postscript can only describe as “illegibility.” Appropriately, Basil’s delirium had begun with the memory of Mannion’s hands:

23rd. . . . Waking or sleeping, it is as if some fatality kept all my faculties imprisoned within the black walls of the chasm. I saw the livid, bleeding hands flying past them again, in my dreams, last night. . . .

\textsuperscript{35} Collins, \textit{Rambles} 75–76; qtd. in \textit{Basil} 356.
26th.—Visions—half waking, half dreaming—all through the night. Visions of my last lonely evening in the fishing-hamlet—of Mannion again—the livid hands whirling to and fro over my head in the darkness—then, glimpses of home; of Clara reading to me in my study—(327)

The last two of the progressively disjointed entries in the diary complete Basil’s fall off the manuscript:

I can’t move, or breathe, or think—if I could only be taken back—if my father could see me as I am now! Night again—the dreams that will come—always of home; sometimes, the untried home in heaven, as well as the familiar home on earth—

* * * * *

Clara! I shall die out of my senses, unless Clara—break the news gently—it may kill her—

Her face so bright and calm! her watchful, weeping eyes always looking at me, with a light in them that shines steady through the quivering tears. While the light lasts, I shall live; when it begins to die out—*

Note by the Editor
*There are some lines of writing beyond this point; but they are illegible.
(329)

The manuscript had been providing Basil with a hand-hold on his reason. Here he is figuratively doubling his double’s fall. He is bloodying his hands trying to grab at seaweed-covered rocks, represented by the fading light of his sister’s eyes, as he falls off the manuscript. We have others taking his papers, and then we have illegibility, and we know he has conclusively fallen off the edge. This conjoint falling off—Mannion’s and Basil’s—might seem to be serving as simply another Collins cliché of light and dark doublings such as that of the light and dark women of Basil’s earlier dream.36 However, this double fall does more than connect Mannion to Basil; it also connects the entities clutched at by these doubles’ hands. Basil’s failure to hold onto the manuscript re-playing Mannion’s failure to hold onto the land, the manuscript thus becomes, analogically, the landed estate Basil had always wanted it to be.

36. Catherine Peters begins her biography of Collins by noting that “[t]here is a question of identity at the heart of every one of his novels. . . . Doubles are often, though not always, involved” (1–2).
It is quite appropriate, then, that the false name that Basil had adopted while living among the people of Cornwall and writing the manuscript, a name that he neglects to mention until the end of the book when he writes his closing letter, had been the name of his sister Clara’s estate, which she had inherited from their mother. The writer of the manuscript has been going under the name of a piece of land. Furthermore, the name of that land itself is suggestive of the manuscript/land connection. The significance of this name, however, only appears when it is broadly contextualized. That Basil, while he is writing the manuscript (throughout the first four-fifths of the novel) should be living under the assumed name “Lanreath” initially means very little to us—especially as that name is never once mentioned during the preceding exposition. But the context in which the name is finally disclosed, at the head of the last of the three letters that Basil appends to that manuscript, in a separate section called “Letters in Conclusion” (Basil 330), is a context giving a new significance not only to the name itself but also to that manuscript. These letters frame the latter end of the manuscript. Thus, the significance of this assumed name for my discussion should be at this point clear: it conjures up a connection between writing and land as the manuscript nominally becomes a sort of “Lan[d]” that these closing letters “[w]reath[e].” It is appropriate that after Mannion and the manuscript find their ends at Land’s End, Basil should write his manuscript frame at Lanreath Cottage, thus wreathing his land/manuscript.

The name Lanreath is one that, despite its single “L,” conjures up Welsh associations. And indeed Clara’s estate will turn out in the final scene of the book to be most definitely located on the west coast of Britain. The book ends with a happy scene of rural contentedness:

I have done. The calm summer evening has stolen on me while I have been writing to you; and Clara’s voice—now the happy voice of the happy old times—calls to me from our garden seat to come out and look at the sunset over the distant sea. Once more—farewell! (Basil 344)

This final scene—in addition to providing a degree of narrative unity through its concluding a book that had opened with a sunrise with a sunset, fitting symbolic approximations of the acts of opening and shutting a book—once

37. Notice that Basil would seem to be the only member of his family not possessing a landed estate.

38. The novelist Dorothy Sayers, writing of the manuscript of Basil held by the British Museum—an early draft of the first edition—points out that originally throughout the tale “the hero was . . . called ‘Philip Lanreath’” (90).
again conflates manuscript with land, for, as the readerly/writerly perspective looks off and away from the manuscript page, the narrator’s perspective looks out beyond the land at the distant sunset over the sea. Appropriately, the end of the letter appended to the manuscript, the end of the manuscript-plus-appendage, coincides with the end of the land.

**Anti-idealized Authors and Texts**

Returning to Basil’s dream, we might notice how its manifest sexual content could *itself* be used to support a textual interpretation. Basil writes,

> I was drawn along in the arms of the dark woman, with my blood burning and my breath failing me, until we entered the secret recesses that lay amid the unfathomable depths of trees. There, she encircled me in the folds of her dusky robe, and laid her cheek close to mine, and murmured a mysterious music in my ear. . . . (Basil 46–47)

As I have remarked, it is not surprising that this writing should at first glance seem “without much subtlety” (Thoms 18). It is *designed* to. However, we might follow the path I am suggesting if we think of the pen as penis or plow (the latter being a connection the corn-fields metaphor calls up)—the nascent writer tearing the paper with his implement, making ink blots, etc.—and if we notice the stress laid on the dark woman’s connection to the soil through the earthy darkness of her dun-colored clothes. Here the vegetal associations of Basil’s name should be highlighted as, having come to be “encircled” within the folds of her “dusky robe,” the hero of the narrative comes to fulfill the requirement proposed for any good work of art by Collins’s Letter of Dedication; that is, as Basil (or Basil) “take[s] root in earth” (*Basil*, 1852 edition, 1:xxxvi).39 Thus, our hero and our author become one with the landscapes of their manuscripts and with the idea of the landscape-as-manuscript as their pens ink the sheets and the paper.

There is an oscillation here between the real and textual worlds. The merging of character (in both the sense of fictional entity and personality) and handwriting allows not only for the narrator to become one with his story, to become one with his autobiography, as Basil had by having come back to his own jaded, experienced self through the journey of “re-self-possession” that was his writing of the text, but also for seeing that written

---

39. In this sense, “dissemination,” the scattering of seeds/texts, quite literally turns into land.
text to be a type of “land.” It allows for, among other transformations, seeing the ownership of the work of the author’s hands, the manuscript, to have come over into the realm of the “real,” as opposed to remaining safely in the domain of the “incorporeal” where Justice Yates in 1769 would have had it stay. It subliminally persuades the reader toward seeing the text as a fertile field planted by its author—a “charac-terra” if you like—and as therefore sacrosanct to the same degree as might be landed property. The dream allegorizes an oscillation between the realm of the real and the realm of the fictive in which the fictive wins, thereby making the world into a system of signs; we, all of us, readers and writer, and world, coming down to the level of the text to find not only that the page itself is a world but conversely that all the world’s a page.

To return to our broader cultural context: as noted earlier, many commentators remark that Wordsworth was quite energetically involved in Talfourd’s parliamentary campaign. With respect to Wordsworth’s efforts in this debate, Susan Eilenberg points out that there came into being among the group surrounding the poet a desire to reject the typical Romantic idealization of the literary creation and the wish to replace it with a less aesthetically-oriented valorization of the work as a material product situated within commercial relations:

The idealization of the literary having often proved hazardous to their finances, these writers were inclined to represent themselves as working men and their writings as the products of their industry. It was their object to claim the same property in their writings as other men had in their farms and grocery stores. (*Strange Power* 204)

The works produced by Dickens and his circle, especially after the passage of the Copyright Act of 1842, were involved in continuing this de-idealization of the literary product. Thus it was appropriate that *Basil* should have been not only one of Dickens’s favorite books40 but also the work that purportedly prompted him to take a serious interest in the future labors of the younger writer. Dickens writes in his congratulatory letter on *Basil* to Collins, “I have read the book with very great interest, and with a very thorough conviction that you have a call to this same art of fiction.”41 It is understandable, then,

given the context of Basil’s manifest concerns with the nature of the author’s labor, that Dickens should, while encouraging Collins during the turbulent writing of No Name a decade later, hark back to the earlier work:

I cannot tell you with what a strange dash of pride as well as pleasure I read the great results of your hard work. Because, as you know, I was certain from the Basil days that you were the Writer who would come ahead of all the Field—being the only one who combined invention and power, both humourous and pathetic, with that invincible determination to work, and that profound conviction that nothing is to be done without work, of which triflers and feigners have no conception.  

For Dickens, a predilection for hard work, much more than God-given genius, was a sign of the high seriousness necessary to prove one belonged in the Field of Victorian literary endeavor. Collins having composed much of the book while being personally trained in the profession by Dickens, it comes as little surprise that he should have allegorized a transformation akin to his own in Basil’s dream of fair and dark women in what critics have consistently taken as his sexually-charged first “sensation scene.”

Copyright as Ideology before the Critique

In the year that Collins was writing Basil, an anonymous reviewer for the Edinburgh Review described a somewhat surprising attitude to be exhibited by some members of the Belgian publishing trade engaged in the controversial practice of pirating French books. Emphasizing the indecorousness in Belgium of what seemed nothing so much as a sophistical malapropism, the reviewer for the Edinburgh remarked:

There, indeed, a party exists which, under pretence of cheap diffusion of knowledge, defends the contrefaçon trade, as a lawful branch of national industry, and inveighs against authors who expect a remuneration for their labours, and against publishers who purchase copyrights, denouncing them as “monopolists.” (Rev. of Projet de loi 146)

The reviewer then expanded the purview of the epithet in a footnote: “[a]ccording to this theory, any man who buys a house or marries a wife,

42. Dickens, “Letter to Collins,” 20 September 1862; qtd. in Page 129.
might be termed a monopolist” (146n). Of course, now it was the reviewer who was overstating the case. Copying a man’s book could hardly be considered to be on a par with having relations with his wife or occupying his home, those two flauntings of exclusion most apt to disturb the twin pillars of propriety maintaining the stability of the Westminster-based landed property system.\footnote{The exclusiveness of the mother’s propriety guarantees and undergirds the proper passing on of the father’s name and the inheritance of the house, as Catherine Gallagher, writing of Tocqueville, makes clear: “The natural signs of inequality are natural only insofar as women’s sexuality and reproductive capacities remain proper. The assumed sexual propriety of women underlies both property relations and semiotics in the world Tocqueville inhabits. . . . The sexually uncontrolled woman . . . becomes a threat to all forms of property and established power” (Gallagher, Fineman, and Hertz 55–57).} The act of copying a book hardly had the same resonance or would seem to have posed the same threat as those other acts—at least, that was, as long as the text and the land or woman in question were not made interchangeable, say, through ideological manipulation. Supposing these seemingly impossible collapsings to have occurred, we would be faced with the limitless dangers of finding lands or wives to be turning immaterial or of finding texts to be turning into immovable objects. They were essentially neither, as Collins well knew.

Apart from, presumably, the piratical Belgian publishers who are here being criticized, many disinterested people of the time also would have queried the reviewer’s rhetorical equation of books with women and houses. Few would have been willing to allow the “sacredness” of the institution of marriage or of the system of landed property ownership to be perceived in the same light as any sort of “sacredness”—the term would have seemed absurd to them in this context—associated with the ownership of literary property. Copyright ideology was still at this time a thing in the early stages of its formation and, as such, something fairly easily contested. For instance, a writer for The Times of London had written the following on November 26, 1851, upon the successful negotiation of an International Copyright Treaty between England and France:

The most hopeless subject of negotiation with the Governments of other countries has long appeared to be an international copyright law. Intellectual “produce” has been the only description of goods excluded from equitable conditions of exchange. . . . The various Governments of Europe and the United States of America have, from time immemorial, virtually declared that a work of literature or art, the property of a single individual in a single nation, was a fair mark for piracy and theft. . . . Nor, in fairness,
can the reprehension be confined to the leading statesmen of the time, no matter what their country, or what their political connexions. The real blame lay with the great bulk of the population, whether in Europe or in America. There has too long existed a profound immorality of thought with regard to the productions of literary genius. Men have said, “It is for our interest to have the readiest means of access to the works of literary men. Their labours cannot be the subject of property any more than the wild fowls of the air.” . . . We are glad to be enabled to state that a treaty for the suppression of this most disgraceful system has at length been signed between England and France. (“The most hopeless subject” p. 4, cols. C–D)

Literary property occupied a special position when it came to determining “equitable conditions of exchange” between individuals and between nations. It would continue to do so even up until the present day for very determined structural reasons, reasons all inevitably related to the iterability of language. Linguistic repeatability causes literary property to tend to be seen as a less-than-solid form of property and its “theft” to be seen as a less-than-criminal form of “crime.”

Giving them the benefit of the doubt, I assume the Belgian publishers had not solely been motivated by a desire for specious self-justification but also had genuinely been influenced by the socialist ideas pervading certain sectors of French intellectual political thought in post-revolutionary France. Not the least influential of the proponents of ideas of this type would have been Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who a decade earlier had put forward arguments that would seem to justify the charge of unfair “monopoly” against all styles, not just literary, of would-be ownership. In 1840, when he had argued that property in general was an “effect without a cause” (Proudhon 13), that neither arguments based on occupation, rule of law, or the mixing of one’s labor with the object adequately explained the seeming unquestionableness of the connection between land and its “owner,” Proudhon had been attempting to unearth a deeply-rooted ideological construct, an ideological construct that had all along required the deployment of a grand system of metaphors and rhetorics to hold it in place. When he had stated, to put the conception in its more famous form, that “property is theft” (13–14), he had been not only exposing a fundamental illusion at the heart of capitalist ideology but also laying the

44. Rice points out (84) that the American economist-publisher and defender of the reprinting of English books Henry C. Carey “went so far as to echo Proudhon’s motto that ‘property is robbery’” in his book *Letters on International Copyright*. 
groundwork for Marx’s later critiques of that ideology. In 1862 he would continue this line of argument in his critique of a proposed perpetual copyright:

By enacting such a law, the legislature will have done far worse than paying the author an exorbitant price, it will have abandoned the principle of the chose publique, of the intellectual domain, and at great harm to the community. . . . Let us not disinherit humanity of its domain. . . . Intellectual property does not merely encroach on the public domain: it cheats the public of its share in the production of all ideas and all expressions. (Qtd. in Ginsburg, “Une Chose” 658)

The prevalent discourse of an “ownership society” (by that I mean individual as opposed to collective ownership) in this country in the early years of this century (for one example, see Hockett), would seem to indicate that we live in a time that would not be willing to understand this type of discourse. We are in a sense too “invested” in the ideology to be able to question it.

However, there were implications to Proudhon’s critique that would not have pleased him. His argument led to the conclusion that all property was merely an ideological, and therefore fundamentally rhetorical, construct. As such, rhetorical manipulation could not only be disclosed to substantively found property but also to potentially threaten it after that foundation in its real-world solidity. This potential was manifestly put into practice when Macaulay used his rhetorical equation of copyright with monopoly to almost single-handedly stop copyright from being granted a duration of sixty years after the death of the author in his speech delivered to the House of Commons on 5 February 1841. The House voted to reject Talfourd’s bill by a vote of 45 to 38. In his speech Macaulay remarked, “Copyright is monopoly, and produces all the effects of monopoly. . . . I may . . . challenge my honourable friend to find any distinction between copyright and other privileges of the same kind; any reason why a monopoly of books should produce an effect directly the reverse of that which was produced by the East India Company’s monopoly of tea, or by Lord Essex’s monopoly of sweet wines” (8:198–99). In a sense Macaulay and Proudhon proved, in very different ways, the lesson that he or she who manipulated the discourse also manipulated the property. This is the strategy that Collins adopted in his book Basil. There he attempted to represent the reification of the text as land and to enact its corollary effect of the conferral upon the author of the status as “owner” of that text, both as means of reinforcing the always threatened author–work relation.
One of the most memorable scenes in all of Collins’s work, Basil’s sensational eavesdropping on his cuckolding, is one in which we find him learning that “monopolistic” possession of his wife was always already going to be impossible, even before the actual marriage had properly begun. He feels violated in the same way that an author who had been pirated might. It is not surprising to find that Mannion, the man conjoining with Margaret in the infancy, had at one point in his life, as already mentioned, worked as a “hack-author of the lowest degree . . . plagiarising from dead authors, to supply the raw material for bookmongering by more accomplished bookmongers” (Basil 231–32). Basil shows us an early example of Collins’s equating women with texts. Here the two different types of authors, one a low-grade plagiarist and the other an autobiographer, engage in a contest over sexual control of a particular woman. And the plagiarist wins, the self-involved, implicitly narcissistic, autobiographer having instead to endure the taunt “He calls himself a man doesn’t he? A husband who waits a year” (294). We might recall here Balzac’s “jesting” equation of a pirating playwright with an adulterer in his 1834 “Letter to Authors”:

In the end, however, Basil, having broken beyond his self-absorption, wins the final battle proving that the real author is the one who not only can call himself a man, but a specific type of man, a literary working man, someone who can use the strong “labor” argument to justify his ownership of the literary text.

Proudhon had signaled that there was a specter haunting the capitalist ownership system. That specter, not surprisingly, was a communism of a certain type—the belief that property was fundamentally open to multiple ownership rendering it in a sense subject to no ownership at all. Whether or not this potential for the fundamental loss of control practically operates
in the real world with regard to commercial relations, it certainly does so in relation to the breaking function of the iterability of the mark as a result of the always precarious endeavor of claiming “ownership” of language. In writing *Basil*, Collins came to realize that words could, literally, create alternate worlds, but the corollary was also there: that iterability could eventually come to undo this world, down to the level of the author’s personality. Iterability’s breaking function continually threatens to radically transform the system, to turn an “ownership society” into one that believes “property is theft.” And in this day and age, that potential transformation has conclusively come to pass, as the constant difficulties besetting the enforcement and legislation of the intellectual property trades clearly demonstrate. Those difficulties are a sign of the unstable theoretical grounding—a situation created by the legal and political decisions of late-eighteenth-century England—residing at the basis of the concept of “literary property.” That unstable theoretical grounding was something Collins in his early career, especially in his novel *Basil*, had believed he could overcome through the sheer force of rhetoric. It was only in the 1860s, finally realizing that he could not win at this struggle in that way, that he would—whole-heartedly in novels like *No Name*, *Armadale*, and *The Moonstone*—learn to move the struggle to the level of generic manipulation and learn to give up the attempt at denying the significance of the breaking function of iterability.