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Narrating a Self: Reconstructing Empire in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*

Wilkie Collins' 1868 novel *The Moonstone* presents readers with an exciting narrative, a cast of entertaining characters, and the suspense of a well-developed mystery. The novel was published on the heels of major colonial revolutions against the British Empire, a time when "the empire appeared on the brink of disintegration" (Duncan 305). The novel's theme of colonial plunder and anxiety over the loss of an Indian diamond invites a critical perspective that explores the text's relation to its historical and political context. With this in mind, we can utilize the theoretical lenses of Fredric Jameson and Edward Said to suggest that in the wake of this "epidemic of insurgency" (qtd. in Duncan 305), the need to preemptively rewrite English identity in the absence of physical colonial possession becomes *the* central theme in *The Moonstone*. Anxiety over England's loosening grip on several of its colonies suggests that Collins's novel was an anticipatory response to a loss that seemed entirely probable. Accordingly, this paper will argue that a sustained English identity does not demand the *literal* retention of the colonial possession by which it originally defined itself, only the ability to *narrate* and *historicize* such original possession.

Jameson argues that "there is nothing that is not social and historical," meaning that no text can exist outside of history and social circumstances; no text can be written "sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social" (20). The social and historical conditions in which a text is written are the "indispensable preconditions" of "interpretation," and not simply a

critical tool (17). From the Marxian perspective, the constellation of political and economic forces is the “absolute horizon” of literary criticism (17). Jameson’s Marxist theory helps us distinguish two distinct levels of fruitful critical terrain: the *symbolic* and the *formal*. Each of these levels will reconstruct the text “in a different way” (76). The *symbolic* will be concerned with the text as a literary narrative, and will view “the individual narrative... as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (77). Of course, the resolution is “imaginary” in that it occurs only within the narrative of the individual text. The *formal* will build upon the *symbolic* resolution and will aim to “rewrite” it “in terms of the antagonistic dialogue of class voices” (85).

It is therefore with good reason that we view the *symbolic act* of the return of an ill-acquired diamond to India in *The Moonstone* as a resolution of a real contradiction—colonizer and colonized. England’s loss of India—a possession that constituted a major aspect of its identity—is the “imaginary resolution” in the sense that India is no longer possessed by an Other. The narrative “comes full circle” and India repossesses itself—that is, the diamond returns to India: “after the lapse of eight centuries, the Moonstone looks forth once more, over the walls of the sacred city in which its story first began” (Collins 542).

The Moonstone is not about the *actual* Moonstone, in the same way that it is not, *symbolically*, about India. Indeed, the diamond has an 800-year history that predates its acquisition by John Herncastle and is glazed over in fewer than two pages (53-55). The novel is, *literally*, about an English family’s acquisition (through the violent storming of Seringapatam) and possession of a large, sacred diamond, its

eventual loss within England, and the diamond's final return home to India. Because of the focus on such a relatively brief span of the diamond's history, I am reading Collins's novel *symbolically* as the gaining, possessing, and losing of India as a colony. This particular metaphor is quite in line with a Marxist theoretical lens.

The resolution between colonizer and colonized reflects a real contradiction in that, by losing its possession of a colony, English identity—the English *empire*—loses part of itself. Clearly, this loss of colony is no matter of small import: Indeed, in imperial rule there

Was a commitment over and above profit, a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation, which...allowed...men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and native peoples *should* be subjugated, and...[to] think of the *imperium* as [an]...obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples. (Said 10)

The commitment to an imperial worldview structures the way the empire *sees itself*. Its worldview reinforces its identification and actual station as Empire. It sees itself as superior when contrasted with the “inferior” and “less advanced” people it subjugates (10). England's possession of India is significant in that it is essential to English imperial identity. There is no English *Empire* without imperial possession. Thus, England “could not *afford* to lose her greatest dependency” (Judd 34, my emphasis). In the text, if the diamond is cut up, “There is an end of its sacred identity” (Collins 131). The very phrase “cut up” reflects anxiety over division,

separation, literally *partition*. Further, if such a possession were cut off from England through revolution or rebellion (or any act requiring agency on the part of the possessed) it would destabilize the notion of inferiority by which the *imperium* or 'right to rule' is justified and thus the ideology that seeks to use an *imperium* as a premise for exploitation. The desire to maintain possession is at the same time a desire to retain identity.

The notion that "there was a commitment *over and above profit*" is paralleled interestingly in *The Moonstone* as an emphasis on possession and reluctance to increase the value of the diamond by cutting it up (Said 10, my emphasis). The desire to retain possession is clearly not for profit: its first English possessor, John Herncastle, "never attempted to sell it" (Collins 85). He refused to have it cut down into smaller stones, even though it would then be worth more "than the large—but imperfect—single stone" (93-94). Indeed, Franklin Blake is astonished at how close his father came to "allowing this magnificent jewel to be lost to the family" (92). Franklin Blake's astonishment reflects the anxiety over the potential breakdown of empire, or "imperialist panic" as Ian Duncan calls it (305). The emphasis in this case is clearly on possession of the stone, not on its financial benefits.

After the family loses possession of the Moonstone, *The Moonstone* becomes a question of understanding the events that took place, not a reacquisition of the stone itself. It is also a recording of history as it proceeds *after* the loss of the diamond. This record is obviously only relevant because of the initial possession. The narrative then places importance on finding the most "rational explanation" (Collins 139). Franklin Blake offers an explanation of how the Moonstone was stolen

by the Indians, only to disregard it with a more accurate “narrative of events” based on his visit to Frizinghall (142). As Mr. Bruff and Mr. Murthwaite trace, or rather, *narrate* the events relating to the Moonstone in order to have “a clear view” of them, we come to understand that *narration can have a “purpose”* (348). With this turn toward narrative events as purposeful, we can move to examine the text at the *formal* level, but only after we have clarified the *symbolic* resolution.

With the loss of the diamond comes the loss of identity, inasmuch as it is constructed in terms of possession. Symbolically speaking, the loss of the Moonstone represents the loss of India as a colonial possession. In this way the resolution is between colonizer and colonized. We must ask: in light of the symbolic loss of India as a colonial possession, how does empire define itself if it no longer possesses an empire? How does *The Moonstone* function as a means of constructing English identity if the very contradiction on which identity sits—the means of identity construction itself—is resolved? Investigating the text at the *formal* level suggests the following: identity becomes less a matter of direct possession and more a product of narrative, or more specifically, a product of *being a narrator*. Narrative is in some sense a possession, so we may accurately say that identity means possessing a narrative. Possessing a narrative is a preservation, yet refiguration, of the colonizer/colonized binary. It now becomes narrator/narrated.

The transition from *symbolic* to *formal* allows us to understand the *symbolic* resolution in terms of “class voices” (Jameson 85). With our movement into the *formal* level, we can view the text “dialogically”—meaning “in terms of the antagonistic dialogue of class voices” (77, 85). *The Moonstone* “retains its structure

as a symbolic act,” but now “the value and character of such symbolic action are...enlarged” (85). *The Moonstone* is *formally* structured by a combination of various antagonistic English classes, yet it forms a unified single narrative. This *formal* structure can sustain conflict between classes “in the interests of truth,” to record—that is, to *narrate*—the passage of the Moonstone (Collins 60). We can therefore read the *formal* level as unifying antagonistic classes. This unification leads to a *formal* reading of the text as a dialogical “utterance” that is grounded in Englishness due in part to the fact that it’s positioned against the othering of an Indian identity, but more significantly to the exclusivity of this English narrative. *Formally* speaking, accurately narrating the events of the diamond’s loss unites English classes that would otherwise (from the Marxian perspective) oppose each other. Viewing the text as a dialogical utterance enables us to observe the power narrative affords: The uniting of classes, construction of an Other, and ultimately, narration of history.

The opportunity to unite classes toward a common interest of “truth” is afforded by the diamond’s movement through England. There would be no narrative without the Moonstone’s acquisition, possession, and loss; there would be no “truth” to record, no reason to appeal to members of oppositional classes. Indeed, *formally* speaking, within a single narrative, wealthy bourgeois like Franklin Blake, the “isolated and poor” like Miss Clack, and “House-Steward” Gabriel Betteredge are regarded as equally important to the narration of events (Collins 255, 59). In fact, one of the most vital contributions to the historical aspect of the narrative—the unveiling of Franklin Blake as thief—is made by (arguably) the lowest “on the

domestic totem pole,” Rosanna Spearman, the second house-maid (Farmer, n 1; Collins 74). Class positionality is not a reason to be excluded from contribution, but appears textually necessary in that there must be oppositional classes for them to unite.

This class opposition is expressed openly in the text. Miss Clack, during her reign as narrator, does not fail to remind the reader of it: “When we are isolated and poor, we are not infrequently forgotten” (Collins 255-256). Betteredge offers a few remarks on class positionality: the “Gentlefolks” spend most of their lives “looking about them for something to do;” he asserts that “People in the high life have all the luxuries to themselves—among others, the luxury of indulging their feelings. People in low life have no such privilege” (105, 221). Clearly Betteredge is not blind to his place on the social hierarchy or the “privileges” it lacks.

The extradiegetic interaction between narrators constitutes a voice that is exclusively English. The structure of the text is, as I have claimed, a dialogical “utterance.” What constitutes the ground of identity, indeed, what allows for the open acknowledgement of oppositional classes, is a deeper opposition. This deeper opposition is the all-knowing *othering* of an Indian identity by English narration—the opposition between narrators and narrated. Indeed, as Said tells us: “The power to *narrate*, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (xiii, my emphasis). *The Moonstone* can most certainly be seen as a cultural artifact, and while the classes of the contributors may vary, the unity they

share in their perspective of the Other links them culturally. Through the process of *othering*, Englishness begins to emerge.

Examples of Indian *othering* abound within the text. Significantly, nearly every narrator (regardless of class positionality) is guilty of this. Often, this *othering* occurs in the form of general stereotypes. Franklin Blake mentions “the patience of Oriental races” (Collins 94). Betteredge, contributing his fair share, often likens the Indians to animals: he describes their quickness as “tigerish,” and their bow as “snaky” (127,128). He also describes India as one of the “outlandish [places] of the earth” full of “thieves and murderers” (132). In the context of Godfrey Ablewhite’s attack, Miss Clack refers to the Indians as “invisible wretches” (261). Mr. Bruff receives a visitor whose “swarthy complexion,” and “grave and graceful politeness of manner, were enough to betray his Oriental origin” (343). Most problematic of all seem to be Mr. Murthwaite’s sweeping statements regarding aspects of the “Indian character”: the “Hindoo people are [clever] in concealing their feelings” and “no Indian... ever runs an unnecessary risk” (129, 352). Murthwaite’s “consummate knowledge of the Indian character” is confirmed over and over again throughout the text (471). Thus, when Murthwaite picks up Betteredge’s tendency to signify ‘Indian’ as ‘animalistic’ (“patience of cats” and “ferocity of tigers”), it is taken as an authoritative declaration (129). The narrators of Collins’s novel confirm Ezra Jennings observation that “There is a wonderful sameness in the solid side of the English character” (488).

While *othering* abounds and is problematic in itself, another complexity emerges when we note the narrative’s exclusivity. Within the text, *othering* is a

powerful tool in circumscribing identity, but the single voice of Englishness—a subtle and fundamental aspect of the novel—seems to do the real work of constructing identity. Various class voices contribute, *formally* speaking, to the unified song that is Englishness. This construction of an Other throughout the text is indeed a deep opposition that constructs Englishness in the absence of colonial possession. But it is the process of narration itself, the voice telling history, which ultimately presents the “dialogical” utterance of English identity, positioned against the absence of an Indian utterance. Indeed, the text offers no “Other” side of the story; it is narrative history from one perspective. But this is no mere perspectivism—a problematic solvable by simply adding an Indian narrator. Only by original theft, loss, and resolution is there material to narrate in the first place. A violent storming provides the subsequent occasion to narrate (Collins 53-55). If at the *symbolic* level India repossesses itself, at the *formal* level it is still a possession of narrative—that is, English narrative.

Betteredge narrates Miss Rachel and Franklin Blake’s marriage after the diamond returns to India (Collins 535-536)—a celebratory recuperation of identity, told by a member of the working class. At this point the narrative resolves the acquisition, possession, and loss of the diamond and thus accomplishes its purpose: the unification of classes, the construction of an Other, and the narration of history. With this identity as narrator secure, the text describes the final movements of the diamond without interrupting the reconstruction of empire. The imperial self remains and, as Said intimates, the nation continues its defining characteristic: narration (xiii).

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