“Recreations for leisure hours”: Popular Entertainment in Collins’s *Hide and Seek*

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Abstract

Collins’s *Hide and Seek* (1854), is a valuable contribution to the Victorian debate on popular entertainment, punctuated as it is by references to the circus, the music hall and the painting exhibition. Leisure appears to be a crucial issue for the author: himself a great entertainer and the father-to-be of the sensation novel, he aimed to gain access to the booming reading market of the 1850s-60s without giving up his literary ambitions. The detailed analysis of amusement he carries out in *Hide and Seek* is a significant step in the accomplishment of his objective, paving the way to the rise of sensation fiction, which, he seems to imply, was the recreation, both amusing and instructing, the Victorian cross-class audience was in need of.

Keywords: Reading audience; commercialization of leisure; popular entertainment; sensation novel; Victorian England; Wilkie Collins

Wilkie Collins is the acknowledged father of the sensation novel, which developed in England between 1860 and 1870, raising a heated critical debate. Right form its appearance, in fact, it was seen as a “product of industry”, a commercial rather than an artistic phenomenon, in Andrew Radford’s words, “synonymous with the swift growth of industrial capitalism and the emergence of large urban centres with newly exploding populations and new social classes” (Radford 2009: 1). According to the Victorian literary establishment, it was not only a substandard genre compared with the “serious” novel, characterized by its moral purpose and shaped after the conventions of realism, but also a dangerous one. Referred to in terms of bodily impact as poison, plague, infection and addictive drug, it was accused of “preaching to the nerves” of the readers—especially of women, who “were considered to be uniquely susceptible to [its] narrative shocks and moral dips” (Allen 2011: 408)—feeding their insatiable hunger for excitement and pathos. In addition, it was held to blur the social boundaries, encouraging miscegenation and dissolving the distinction between the genteel reading habits of the elite and the coarse pastimes of the newly literate working class—that is, dissolving the distinction between “high” and “low”

de Giovanni, Flora. 2014. “‘Recreations for leisure hours’: Popular Entertainment in Collins’s *Hide and Seek*.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 13(4):20-37.

culture, which was one of the strongholds of middle-class identity and "a means of fending off shifting class relations by reinforcing existing categorical containers" (Radford 2009: 65).

Undeniably, Collins's extremely successful sensation novels marked "a breakthrough in the marketing of fiction as a commodity form" (Law 2006: 97). His reflections on popular readership—"a phenomenon worth examining", as he wrote in "The Unknown Public", published in Dickens's *Household Words* in 1858—attest his interest in expanding his own public, by conquering the submerged market of those, "to be counted by millions", who bought the penny-novel journals for amusement only. Unlike their social and intellectual "betters", who read for information and amusement alike, they are naïve and ignorant, he remarks with some irony, but they can be taught to tell a good book from bad one. And although his reaction to the emergence of the mass audience was on the whole ambivalent (Collins was to become increasingly anxious about his literary status after the success of *The Woman in White*), he is aware that the future of English fiction rests with "the readers who rank by millions", who will make up "such an audience as has never yet been known" (Collins 1858a).

In the 1850s and 1860s, the growing demand for artistic and literary products determined a boom in fiction, painting and theatre, which reached an enlarged and more heterogeneous public – a transformation that Collins warmly welcomed. "King Public", he wrote in 1858, "is a good king for Literature and Art!" (qtd in Pyckett 2005: 11). Like Dickens, for whose periodicals he provided novels and essays, he was ready to cash in on the new trends in cultural production. All the more so, perhaps, because in his life he experienced a peculiar mobility between different cultural networks: the literary world, the theatrical scene and artistic circles, from the Royal Academy to the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood (Dolin 2006: 9-10). A painter, a dramatist and the adapter of his own stories for the stage, Collins maintained that the novel and the play were "twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; […] and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also" (Collins 2008a). In his activity as author, he acted accordingly, as the recognized influence of melodrama on the sensation novel shows.

Moreover, he was very keen on popular entertainment: an inveterate circus- and theatre-goer, like Dickens, he regularly attended all sorts of

performances, often in the company of his long-term friend and mentor. The range of pastimes and amusements available in Collins's day was extensive and ever increasing, owing to the greater economic security and the improvements in communications which—as he himself acknowledged in "Dramatic Grub Street" (1858)—"more than supply in quantity what audiences have lost in quality" (Collins 1858b). No longer intermingled with work, no longer part of an integrated continuum of communal and ritualized activities, leisure emerged as "a discrete new sector in an increasingly compartimentalised life-space" (Bailey 2003: 20), constituted by the social transformations brought about by the combined processes of industrialization and urbanization. Though by no means a mid-Victorian invention, by the mid-Victorian period amusement had turned into a consumer good "placed for sale on the 'free' market" (Turner 1982: 54). However, even when, in the course of the century, the small-scale entertainments of informal and popular origins, such as the circus and the music hall, developed into big business, they always retained part of their original nature, refusing to be simply colonized by the emergent cultural industry and "answering both to the ritual promptings of an indigenous custom […], and the slicker formulation of mass or middle brow commercial confection" (Bailey 2003: 11).

The middle class benefited most from the wider choice that the market supplied, but the working class too got into the "habit of enjoyment", with the result that the devotees of entertainment formed a socially mixed public. For example, the two classes mingled in the music hall, which came into existence in the 1840s, and the same can be said of the circus, which reached the apex of its popularity in the 1850s and 1860s. Leisure appeared thus as a fairly unstructured area, where the traditional social distinctions and hierarchies were at risk of being ignored or subverted. "A dangerous frontier zone", in Bailey's words, it did not afford the bourgeoisie any protection from unwanted contacts with the lower classes: "To middle-class sensibilities, leisure represented a normative as well as a cultural void and placed alarming new responsibilities upon the individual capacity for self-direction" (Bailey 2003: 20-21), calling for a morally acceptable redefinition. The key concept of respectability, which meant rectitude and economic prudence and self-sufficiency, provided a powerful value system which favored the assimilation of part of the working class—the "respectables", as opposed

to the "roughs"—into the middle-class. It was along the lines of the "respectable/non-respectable formulation", a sharper divide than the one between the rich and the poor, that some order was apparently imposed on the "fluid and open territory" of entertainment.

Moreover, by the second half of the century, the pastimes, which had formerly been attacked by both utilitarian and evangelical disciplines as an invitation to vice, were rehabilitated, since they were assigned the function of giving new strength to those who labored under an excessively demanding work regime. Re-creation, a word preferred to leisure for its moral overtones, offered the workers a moment of relief from the strain of everyday life—a functionalist view of entertainment which was shared by Dickens. In *Hard Times* (1854), in fact, Sleary, the proprietor of the horsemanship of that name, affirms: "People mutht be amuthed […] they can't be alwayth a working, nor yet they can't be alwayth a learning" (1962: 36-37). Far from being an alternative to Coketown, as some critics have maintained, the circus is "a product of and attachment to industrial society" (Stoddart 2000: 137), the safety valve necessary to its survival. As Dickens clearly stated in "The Amusement of the People" (1850): "…We consider the hour of idleness passed by [the lower] class of society as so much gain to society at large" (1897: 162).

However, if *Hard Times* has been considered a valuable contribution to the contemporary debate about popular entertainment, Collins's *Hide and Seek*, published in the same year, has not aroused an equal interest. Surprisingly, because, in my opinion, it is a sort of survey of the pastimes the Victorian middle class allowed itself, punctuated as it is by references to the circus, the music hall, art exhibitions, cribbage and boxing. The novel, though not properly sensational, is nonetheless on the way to sensation, especially in its 1861 edition, where Collins abridged and omitted some passages in the attempt to meet the public's increasing demand for exciting and interesting stories. Thus, like a sensation novel, *Hide and Seek* is melodramatic and sentimental, deals with adultery and illegitimacy, presents startling coincidences and stereotyped characters, and in the end resorts to poetic justice, rewarding virtue and punishing vice. Its plot unfolds along the disclosure of Mary Grice's secret origins by her uncle Mat. The "mysterious foundling! aged 10 years!! totally deaf and dumb!!!" (Collins 1999: 56), who displays her disability in Jubber's circus, is the emotional catalyst of the narration. Little Mary is

adopted by the painter Valentine Blyth and his bedridden wife Lavvy, thus entering a bourgeois home where she receives and reciprocates their loving care. Here she is renamed Madonna after the Madonnas of Raphael, for the "softness, purity and feminine gentleness" inscribed in her features (Collins 1999: 51), and is transformed into the ideal of the angel-like middle-class young woman, "too fragile, unworldly, or innocent to use her tongue" (Gitter 1992: 183), even though she is denied the traditional happy ending—that is, marriage with her beloved Zack Thorpe, who is discovered to be her half brother in the final pages of the novel.

Undoubtedly, Mary is not one of those passionate and purposeful heroines featured in the sensation novel, who reject their female role challenging the domestic ideal. Quite the opposite: she is "an exaggerated type of feminine virtue" (Flint 2006: 158), all the more so because speechless. But, nonetheless, her presence confronts Collins's readers with what was a thorny issue in a society where impairment was believed to produce degeneracy in the unborn child—namely, the disabled woman's right to marriage and motherhood. Whereas in the "twin structure" based nineteenth-century novel non-able-bodied female characters were usually situated on the margins of the plot, leaving the leading romantic role to an able-bodied heroine, significantly in *Hide and Seek* there is no such heroine to usurp Mary's role in the story. Like any other (hearing) girl of her age, she falls in love with Zack, who, however, does not reciprocate her feeling. According to Stoddard Holmes, "Collins's novels construct disabled women as figures of eros rather than pathos" (Stoddard Holmes 2009: 76), thus undermining the current vision of disability, which confined them to a circumscribed, marginal space outside the normative sexual economy. Mary is endowed with desires and expectations and is objectified in erotic terms from the start—that is, "she is characterized as a sexual object before she is identified as deaf" (Stoddard Holmes 2009: 76). But in fact her beauty and womanly virtues cannot counterbalance her anomalous condition, which seems to me the reason why her love story with Zack does not materialize: in my opinion it is precisely her deafness, not the specter of incest, that "disables" the romance, incest being but a sort of emergency measure which allows the author to eschew a potentially alarming and subversive happy ending. Thus Collins's dissident view of the impaired girl as a sexual and domestic subject is ultimately re-contained within the

established order it apparently questions, reinforcing the accepted values and confirming the reader's expectations: Mary ends up an unmarried middle-class daughter who self denyingly takes care of her foster parents, recast as she is in the role of the prepubescent, self-disciplined young woman traditionally associated with female disability.

Within this narrative frame Collins approaches the subject of entertainment, showing a considerable awareness of some of the issues at stake in his age, such as the close connection between urbanization and leisure, its growing commercialization, the threat to the values of the bourgeoisie posed by the socially vulnerable area of enjoyment, the composition of the cross-class audience, the moral dangers young males in particular were exposed to if they overstepped the limits of the evangelically-dominated respectability, applying themselves "more to play than to business" (Huggins 2000: 589-590). His main concern seems to be the amusement of the middle class, which had gained a leading position in the nation thanks to its entrepreneurial spirit and moral values, but which, outside working life, modeled itself on the manners of the aristocracy in order to acquire a higher status—a theme that he explores from the very start of the book, associating it with the massive expansion of London's north-western suburbs between 1837 and 1851. According to Dolin, modernity in Collins is a process in the making, a subterranean force which shapes the landscape, leaving it "in a permanently suspended state of transition from the old to the new", its houses and streets unfinished and unused (Dolin 2006: 17). This is exactly how the residential area around Baregrove Square looks, prey to the triumphant army of "the hod, the trowel and the brick-kiln" (Collins 1999: 26). The author's description of its desolation and the analysis of the demographic distribution of its inhabitants, though much less detailed than in the first edition, are nevertheless very accurate, suggesting how alert he was to the social changes that were taking place. The new neighborhood is inhabited by a multi-layered bourgeoisie, divided up into "middle class with large incomes", "middle class with moderate incomes" and "middle class with small incomes" (Collins 1999: 28). Those with "moderate incomes" represent, in Collins's words, "a sort of neutral ground": their cultural identity, characterized by the absence of any distinctive feature, is threatened both by the "large incomes" and the "small incomes"—a condition mirrored in the architecture of the suburb

they live in, which sometimes resembles the grand mansions of the former, at others the shabby "brick boxes" of the latter.

Significantly, whereas the upper and the lower classes pursue their traditional pastimes according to their tastes and within their means, the fact that the "moderate incomes" have no "characteristic recreations for leisure hours, adapted equally to their means and to their tastes" reveals their identity crisis (Collins 1999: 30). They scorn the amusements of the workers and, "rotten with social false pretences as they generally are", they seek to imitate the gentlemen's life style. As a consequence, their entertainments are devoid of pleasure and these "respectable commercial people"—a unique case in the whole civilized world, the author maintains—found themselves "in no one of their festive arrangements, true to their incomes, to their order, or to themselves; and, in very truth, for all these reasons and many more, got no real enjoyment out of their lives…" (Collins 1999: 31). English middle-class leisure, Collins seems to imply, joyless, grey, somewhat mechanical, is in urgent need of reform and reformulation. How this should be achieved is not suggested in the novel, but I believe that the novel itself provides a solution.

Collins focuses on the clash between Mr. Thorpe, "the rigid modern Puritan of Baregrove Square", and his son Zack, who stubbornly affirms: "I don't want to be respectable and I hate commercial pursuits" (Collins 1999: 45), thus resisting the traditional values of self-discipline, duty, responsibility and commitment to work his father champions. Zack is the embodiment of the reprobate youth, exceedingly fond of entertainment, whose morality was a major concern of Victorian society: the young unmarried male who enjoyed more free time than the older generation and who could be easily lured into vice by the unprecedented abundance of pleasures now at hand. On the contrary, Mr Thorpe—the sternest and the most unreasonable of fathers, as the prologue to the novel shows—represents the evangelical obsession with sin. Convinced that theaters are "the Devil's Houses" and "Labyrinths of National Infamy", the only pastimes he allows his son are the oratorio performances and the scientific lectures at the Royal and Polytechnic Institutions. But, as Dickens affirms, "a people formed entirely in their hours of leisure by Polytechnic Institutions would be an uncomfortable community" (1897: 158), and Zack is all too eager to escape the narrow limits of the respectable residential suburbs where he lives and plunge into "the amusements and dissipation of the town", which granted men at leisure

anonymity and freedom from their neighbors' social control. His secret "nocturnal tours" in the West End, take him to "the disreputable places of public recreation", still open when the respectable ones are all closed—namely, to the Snuggery music hall.

The music hall, which grew out of the informal sing-along in the beer-houses, was to become extremely successful in the course of the century, developing from a small-scale entertainment into a big business which attracted investors and managers. By the time Collins wrote *Hide and Seek*, its distinctive performance style was more or less established. Although the audience was a cross-class one, the performance was mainly addressed to the lower orders of society and to that portion of the upper classes who wished to evade conventional morality (Bratton 2004: 167). For this reason the music hall was repeatedly attacked by the purity campaigners, whose targets were drunkenness and lasciviousness. Collins's Snuggery is definitely no respectable place; rather, it is "utterly vicious". And vice, openly displayed, is exactly what attracts the drunken "roughs" of the working-class who every night pack into the shabby and unwholesome hall devoid of all ornaments and comforts, where worn-out performers exhibit their scant musical talent:

> Here, in short, was vice wholly undisguised; recklessly showing itself to every eye, without the varnish of beauty, without the tinsel of wit, without even so much as the flavour of cleanness to recommend it. Were all beholders instinctively overcome by horror at the sight? Far from it. […] For, let classical moralists say what they may, vice gathers followers as easily, in modern times, with the mask off, as ever it gathered them in ancient times with the mask on. (Collins 1999: 180)

Although Collins grew increasingly impatient with his family's evangelicalism and occupied a liminal position between orthodoxy and unconventionality throughout his adult life, his description of the Snuggery seems to echo his own father's moral stance and concern with propriety, reflecting the stereotyped bourgeois view of the lower class, which, in fact, was not so drunken, bawdry and unruly as it was depicted (Davis and Emeljanow 2004: 94-95). The place, perceived precisely as a socially permeable area which defied control, reveals the (physical) dangers of inter-class relationships, in so far as the young gentleman Zack gets involved in a gigantic brawl with those very "roughs" he is supposed to shun: "Yells of 'Turn him out!' and 'Police!' followed; people at the other end of the room jumped up excitably on their seats;

the women screamed, the men shouted and swore, glasses were broken, sticks were waved, benches were cracked, …" (Collins 1999: 183). Far from being a large and glittering purpose-built hall, the Snuggery is in fact one of those early establishments meant to serve a small community, where "everybody seems to know everybody" and "the audience appear to constitute quite a happy family" (qtd in Bratton 2004: 168). The brawl is sparked by a stranger who captures the attention of the company for his unusual appearance (his brown skin, his scars, his cool and piercing eyes), and especially for wearing a black velvet skull-cap, since, as we learn, he has been scalped by the Indians of the American prairies. "The English" Collins remarks, "are the most intolerant people in the world, in their reception of anything which presents itself to them under the form of a perfect novelty" (Collins 1999: 181). The man, Mat Grice, is thus provoked and assailed for being a disturbance to the audience's sense of identity, that "us" that the music hall performance constantly reinforced, presenting and defining the local or the national type (Bratton 2004: 177). His otherness is what makes him the real attraction of the Snuggery: all eyes converge on the foreigner, establishing the dynamics of staring which enacts the social ritual of exclusion from the community (whether national, racial, able-bodied, or whatever), whose standards for self-definition are produced and authorized by comparison with those on the fringes.

The exhibition of what is anomalous and extraordinary also appeals to the "crowd of rustics" who attend Jubber's circus, where the deaf and dumb little Mary—the Marvel of Nature, the Eighth Wonder of the World—plays card tricks, displaying, in fact, her disability: "[Mr Jubber] then lifted her upon the broad low wall which encircled the ring, and walked her round a little way […], inviting the spectators to test her total deafness by clapping their hands, shouting, or making any loud noise they pleased close at her ear" (Collins 1999: 59). Here the "us/them" dynamics, though equally subservient to an excluding definition of normalcy, elicits a sympathetic rather than an aggressive response in the paying public, which the ringmaster is ready to exploit to the utmost, staging a "spectacle of afflictions". Mary's entrance into the ring, "the great circle of gazers", is greeted in fact with murmurs of sympathy, which Collins, however, disapproves of, tainted as they are with "traces of degradation", since their craving for unnatural sights and their willingness to abandon themselves to conventional sentimentality are

essentially degrading. This time the member of the bourgeoisie found in the company of such a coarse party is the artist Valentine Blyth, a "moderate incomes" who, nevertheless, is very different from his neighbors and, like Collins himself, occupies a position somewhere in between social conformity and dissidence. Valentine is no regular circus-goer: he is neither excited nor amused by the performance, and he is certainly out of place among the audience, which shows a "dastard insensibility to all decent respect for human suffering [feasting] itself on the spectacle of calamity paraded for hire, in the person of a deaf and dumb child of ten years old" (Collins 1999: 57-58). A "monster audience", it appears, similar to the one that in "The Unknown Public" is said to be lacking in inborn taste and delicacy and to be attracted by melodrama.

The increasing commodification of the circus which, in obedience to the law of supply and demand, develops to fulfill the wishes of the consumers, implies Collins's fear of the vulgarization of leisure, which, as he wrote in "A Plea for Sunday Reform" (1851), should on the contrary be devoted to improvement, instruction and enjoyment. Jubber, who sells exactly what his audience want to buy, puts advertising to good use to maximize his profits and exploits his defenseless performers, is the fictional embodiment of the "new kind of organization that enabled the circus to develop into a trade" (Assael 2005: 44). Of all forms of entertainment, the circus is the one which best exemplifies the nineteenth-century commercialization of amusement, becoming a proper business venture in the Victorian period, even though it had proved financially rewarding from the start: Astley, for example, devised a pay-for-entry arena for the "display of acts which had previously been characterised by their dispersed, itinerant and singular nature" (Stoddart 2000: 13-14). The comparison between *Hard Times* and *Hide and Seek* reveals two different visions of the circus, although the superficial similarities in their descriptions are such that, possibly, the two writers were remembering the same show, "perhaps one they had seen together" (Peters 1999: XIV). Whereas Dickens's emphasis lies less on the economic nature of the enterprise than on the pleasure the performers take in their work (Schlicke 1988: 7), Collins is aware of the extent to which their life depends on both the whimsical demands of the audience and the tyranny of the impresario—that is, on the market laws. In his unsentimental view, the circus, far from being a happy family like in

Dickens, is rather a place where life can be as miserable, harsh and unhappy as in the industrial workspace. The case of Little Mary, exploited, threatened and beaten by Jubber, may well have reminded Victorian readers of child labour in factories and mines, but Collins's highly dramatic description of the accident in which she loses her hearing while galloping around the ring also seems to herald the public campaign resulting in The Children's Dangerous Performance Bill (1879), that prevented children under fourteen from performing life-endangering circus acts.

If the circus, alternatively perceived as transgressive and safe, respectable and disreputable, had a somewhat contested role in Victorian England (Assael 2005: 7), certainly Collins resorted to its dark side to depict Jubber's venue, highlighting its dubious moral and artistic reputation. He apparently sides with those who condemned it as a corrupting, irrational amusement, against those who remarked, on the contrary, that it was altogether innocent and could exert a soothing influence on the working classes, encouraging their participation in a sober pleasure. Although it was also very popular among the upper-classes, who occupied the boxes of the grand amphitheaters according to a hierarchical pricing policy, Collins suggests that in fact it is no middle-class recreation, like the music hall. Which takes us back to the opening question as to how the bourgeoisie are to spend their leisure time properly and satisfyingly. But the genteel pastime he describes in *Hide and Seek*—namely, Valentine's exhibition—proves no solution to the problem, devoid of all pleasure as it is.

As Flint convincingly argues, Victorian society was characterized by the "accelerated expansion of diverse opportunities for differing sorts of spectatorship", caught up as it was in "a sort of frenzy of the visible" (Flint 2002: 2-3). This fascination with the eye and the act of seeing was responsible for the wide popularity enjoyed by new forms of visual display, which ranked high especially among middle-class entertainments: the exhibitions that celebrated commerce and art, panoramas, dioramas, museums and art galleries. Paintings were exhibited not only in institutions such as the Royal Academy and the likes, but also in private salesrooms and venues, attracting an expanding public. A painter brought up among painters, Collins was very familiar with art and art criticism and a careful observer of the growing interest painting was arousing in those years. Despite the fact that his father was

a member of the Academy and that he himself had exhibited there in 1848, Collins criticized its "strictly conservative policy" and its commonplace pictures. However, he did not approve of the Pre-Raphaelites' innovative style either, because he deemed its minute detail wanting in overall harmony and singleness of effect. Moreover around 1854, while writing *Hide and Seek*, he launched an attack on the classicism of Claude and Poussin, of which Valentine's pictures appear to be a poor imitation.

In his author's intentions, Blyth was to represent a "startling novelty" in fiction: an artist, that is, who was not "friendless, consumptive and penniless", but who was rather an amusing character (qtd in Peters 1999: 432). In the hilarious scene of his home exhibition, the targets of Collins's irony seem to be the worlds of both art and entertainment. Blyth, who is devoid of talent as a painter, gives a pompous and boring talk on the meaning of his pictures to an audience which seems to be altogether disinterested in and ignorant about painting. Lecturing on Art Pastoral and Art Mystic, he takes on the role of the critic—a "middleman" between public and artist, in Whistler's words—whose increasingly influential task in Victorian age was to educate the rising number of those who had no training in aesthetics but who, nonetheless, visited the painting exhibitions and purchased artworks. In "To think, or to be thought for" (1856), Collins strongly objected to criticism, "which has got obstructively between Art and the people", assuming that in order to make up our mind about a picture, all we need is a pair of eyes and "the undisturbed possession" of our senses, since no "other branch of intellectual art […] has such a direct appeal, by the very nature of it, to every sane human being as the art of painting" (Collins 1856). However, like his Victorian fellow-critics, who focused on the narrative content and/or the didactic message of the painting, Valentine does not speak to the spectator's eye. First, conforming to the rules of contemporary connoisseurship (Flint 2002: 213), he deciphers the symbolism of *Columbus in Sight of the New World*. Then, turning to what he calls "Reality", he examines the "fidelity to nature" of Columbus's muscular system, pertinaciously interrupted by the doctor, whose remarks are no less unwarranted and useless for the purpose of taking pleasure in art than Valentine's own:

> 'Follow the wand, my dear madam, pray follow the wand! This is the *Biceps*, […]. The *Biceps*, Lady Brambledown, is a tremendously strong muscle—'

> 'Which arises in the human body, your Ladyship', interposed the Doctor, 'by two heads—'
> 'Which is used ', continued Valentine, cutting him short—'I beg your pardon, Doctor, but this is important—which is used—'
> 'I beg yours', rejoined the Doctor, testily. 'The origin of the muscle, or place where it arises, is the first thing to be described. The use comes afterwards. It is an axiom of anatomical science—'
> 'But, my dear sir!' cried Valentine—
> 'No', said the Doctor, peremptorily, 'you must really excuse me. This is a professional point. If I allow erroneous explanations of muscular system to pass unchecked in my presence—' (Collins 1999: 241-242)

The visitors Blyth admits into his painting-room, we are told, belong to all social classes—an unusual leveling tendency encouraged by his noble patroness, the Dowager Countess of Brambledown, whose pleasure is "to exhibit herself to society as an uncompromising Radical". But, it seems, no one is there out of a genuine interest in art and Valentine's home exhibition is itself above all a social event. The aristocracy of money, in fact, "came quite as much to look at the Dowager Countess as to look at the pictures" (Collins 1999: 229)—that is, to mix with the aristocracy of race, whose entertainments it sought to imitate for rank's sake. But, worse still, the visitors, irrespective of their differences in origin and class, are irresistibly attracted by the deaf and dumb Mary, who turns out to be a key figure in Collins's view of entertainment, providing an example of how the "heterogeneous congregation of worshippers at the shrine of art" reveal no better taste and delicacy than the "crowd of rustics" who attend the circus in search of sensation. Although the new name of Madonna seems to redeem her from her dishonorable past, transforming her cheap visibility as a circus star into a lofty pictorial one, her metamorphosis is only superficial, hindered at heart by her bodily difference, which defies the mainstream notions of normalcy, awaking people's morbid interest. Collins appears to be aware of the stare-and-tell ritual that "constitutes disability identity in the social realm" (Garland Thomson 2000: 335), since in the novel Mary's defectiveness summons the gaze and raises questions. In order to disrupt the visual dynamics between the non-disabled onlooker and the disabled curiosity, Blyth removes her from sight as much as possible, in compliance with the separate spheres ideology which prescribed women's confinement to the private dimension of domestic life, thus granting her the invisibility becoming to her new bourgeois status. But, whether performing in the

circus as a child, or simply leading the middle-class woman's retired life, she is on show, unwittingly staging the spectacle of her disability by her mere presence, as Valentine's painting exhibition suggests. Here she offers a "much more interesting sight than *Columbus* or *The Golden Age*" (Collins 1999: 249) to the 'lovers of the arts' of all social conditions, who equally revel in the display of impairment. Quite surprisingly, Collins denies the simplistic equation between class and natural feeling which he himself implicitly establishes in "The Unknown Public", where he distinguishes the middle-class readers of cultivated tastes from the newly literate majority of lower social rank, who show "inconceivably dense ignorance, inconceivably petty malice, and inconceivably complacent vanity"—a divide to be ascribed not only to the latter's lack of education but also to the seemingly very little "share of taste and delicacy they have inherited from Nature" (Collins 1858a).

Collins's vision of how the middle-class spends its leisure time undoubtedly provides the answer "no" to his opening question "Do these people ever manage to get any real enjoyment out of their lives…?" (Collins 1999: 30). In the author's opinion, they did not have any pastime, at once respectable and pleasurable, suited to their tastes: the music hall was vicious and dangerous; the circus satisfied the spectators' diseased craving for unnatural sights, thus reinforcing their irrational side; the painting exhibition, which was expected to instruct and amuse, was devoid of both instruction and amusement. This utterly negative description, made as it was by a writer who was alive to the problems of middle-class recreation, the expansion of the leisure market and the improvement of the broadening public's poor tastes—a writer, in short, whose interest was to propose his own literary production as the entertainment the middle-class was in need of—seems to pave the way for the rise of the sensation novel. Collins's depiction appears to draw on the artificially constructed image of the lower class and its expected behavior and the prejudiced view of enjoyments some members of the middle class had. However, since he was a somewhat dissident bourgeois who held the cult of respectability of his own class in contempt, with its conventional morality and social pretension, he did not adhere to the ideology of the dominant class wholeheartedly, but rather challenged it, showing how its habits and likings were also questionable. If Dickens constructed an audience in need of the civilizing stimulus of popular entertainment in his fiction and weeklies (Davis and Emeljanow 2004:

98-99), which played a major role in the cultural boom of the 1850s and 1860s, Collins, who was a regular contributor, may well have devised an image of middle-class leisure subservient to his own literary projects, sharing his mentor's concern for the reformation of amusement. The detailed analysis of entertainment he carries out in *Hide and Seek* seems to be a significant step in the accomplishment of his objective.

Collins's ambition to have access to the booming reading market and, at the same time, to be taken seriously as a novelist was not easy to fulfill, as his life-long worries about his literary reputation attest. In the prefaces to his novels he repeatedly resorted to "adherence to the truth", and "the light of reality"—i.e., to the precepts of Victorian "high" literature – to certify his seriousness of intent as a writer and the aesthetic value of his achievements, but he was also conscious that fiction, in order to be successful, had to be amusing—which means, had to meet the reader's demands. The newly-literate public hungered for strong emotions, like the circus-goers in *Hide and Seek*, but the well-educated middle-class readership might well have had the same wish, as the visitors to Valentine's exhibition seem to suggest. Was this wish legitimate, in Collins's opinion? Apparently it was not, as we have seen, but in fact strong emotions are exactly what he decided to give the audience of his sensation novel, imbuing his fiction with the same "combination of fierce melodrama and meek domestic sentiment" and the same "strong situation" he criticized in the serial stories, which were the chief attraction of the penny-novel journals (Collins 1858a). In so doing, Collins appears to challenge the intellectually elitist stance which saw high and popular culture as appealing respectively to reason and emotion—the elitist stance, that is, which he took up in "The Unknown Public". This challenge echoes Dickens's own, who, at the end of "The Amusement of the People", remarked that the Italian Opera and melodrama staged the same extreme and conventional passions, which excited both the common people and the aristocracy: "So do extremes meet; and so there is some hopeful congeniality between what will excite Mr. Whelks and what will rouse a Duchess" (Dickens 1897: 177).

Such "hopeful congeniality" Collins was willing to exploit, addressing a public whose boundaries, no longer delineated along class lines, he redrew to include the "enormous, outlawed majority of the […] three millions" who "must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate" (Collins 1858a). This was his

target market in the age of the insurgence of mass culture and, in order to become a writer for all classes, he gave his readership the excitement it demanded. This, however, was no escapist choice, as it may seem: by doing so—that is, by adopting a mode of excess and exaggeration, which the stern contemporary critics perceived as opposed to common sense experience (Radford 2009: 17)—he managed to tell its audience what it did not want to hear, allowing himself a depiction of the Victorian society which the realistic representation of "high" literature with its stringent moral purpose could not afford. Dealing with crime, adultery, bigamy and illegitimacy—all shameful secrets, concealed in an apparently proper bourgeois household—the sensation novel undermined the traditional image of the middle-class, resulting in a somewhat subversive attack on its beliefs and values, as the recent critical reassessment of Collins's work and of sensation fiction at large has repeatedly underlined. He held a mirror up to the bourgeoisie, the mirror of cultural performance, which, according to Turner, reflects a social group in a magnifying, diminishing, or distorting fashion, nonetheless heightening its self-awareness: "For no one likes to see himself as ugly, ungainly or dwarfish. Mirror distortions provoke reflexivity" (Turner 1982: 105). This is precisely what the leisure genres of art and entertainment are expected to do in those complex, vast-scale industrial societies of which Victorian England was an early example.

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