Catherick and Laura Fairlie—are also the two characters who assume the least personal control (Mrs. Vesey excepted) of their own identities and who are most complicit in the attempts of others to inscribe them into roles. The plausible Laura in particular becomes student, lover, wife, and even madwoman almost literally on command. By contrast, every man or woman in the text who actively tries to remake an identity succeeds. Over months in the jungles of Central America, Harrriage remakes himself into a modern knight errant; over years in the “civilised desolation” (503) of Welmingham, Mrs. Catherick rebuilds herself from a fallen woman into the formidable Mrs. Grundy of her community. Pesca transforms himself from radical Italian freedom fighter to peaceful “English” tutor, and Posco, once a radical Brotherhood member alongside Pesca, transforms himself into... well, Posco. Even Sir Percival, with a relatively impressive display of ingenuity, forges his way back into a cherished identity he has been in danger of losing.

That Collins would attempt such an ambitious, panoramic, and pointed treatment of Victorian identity should perhaps not be a surprise. Tamar Heller has pointed out in a recent review essay that the concept of character “hybridity” (“Masterpiece” 364) seems central to many of Collins’s projects, from the gender doublings of The Woman in White to the strange half-white, half-dark hair of Ezra Jennings in The Moonstone. But in this essay, Heller also implies that modern scholarship on Collins has kept pace with its subject’s complexity, and I think this position would be harder to support. In the novel’s preambles, the narrator, Harrriage, asks readers to approach the book as a collection of evidence—and we have—but he also asks us to treat every element of that evidence as fundamentally connected—“the course of one complete series of events” (33)—and there we have been less successful. While our various theoretical tools have given us greater analytic strength, they also seem to inhibit synthetic thinking, encouraging scholars to assert, when a text responds to the issues favoured by a specific theoretical position, that we have found the key to that text. Nor does it solve this problem to collect our diverse readings in casebooks or essay collections, where they most often remain a set of opposed or diverging monologic positions rather than forming true problem-solving dialogues.

In the same way that the theft of Lady Glyde’s identity was too complex and ingenious a crime for a single detective to solve, literary texts such as The Woman in White may be both too diverse to be illuminated by any single critical position and too significantly unified in overall purpose to be understood piecemeal. Precisely because it has been almost uniquely successful at responding with intriguing answers to the full range of our current critical inquiries, however, The Woman in White might have unique potential to serve as the key to a dialogic reengagement among Victorians. Like the East End neighbourhood where Walter, Marian, and Laura go to ground, it may provide the best place for us to gather and learn to better pool our resources, genuinely share our knowledge and perspectives, and plot our next strategic moves together.

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Janet Hamilton, “A Plea for the Doric” (1870)

Florence Boos

Forg’te, oh, forg’te me, auld Scotian’, my mither!
Like an ill-behaved child I’ve ta’en up wi’ another;
And ait thy dear Doric aside I hae flung,
To busk out my sang wi’ the prood Southron tongue.

They say that our auld hamlet tongue, my ain mither,
Is deen’, and sune will be dead a’thegether;
When thy callants hae ceased to be valiant and free,
And thy maids to be modest, oh just let it dee!

Shall the tongue that was spoken by Wallace the wicht,
In the sangs o’ thy poets sae lo’esum and bright,
Sae pithe an’ pawkie, sae tender an’ true,
O’ sense and sly humour an’ feelin’ sae fu’;

Shall the tongue that was spoken by leal Scottish men,
When they stood for their righs on the hill an’ the glen—
Oh, say, maun it dee, when the last words that hung
On the lips o’ the martyr war ain mither tongue?
Oh, think ye the tongue that at red Bannockburn
Bade charge to the onser—think ye it maun turn
to a thing o’ the past, that our hairs winna ken
To read mither tongue on that mither’s fire en’?

Just think gif the “Cottar’s ain Saturday Nacht”
War stripped o’ the Doric, wi’ English bedicht—
To the leal Scottish heart it wad ne’er be the same;
Wi’ sic truth and sic feelin’ it wadna strike hame.

At the saft gloamin’ hour, “when the kye’s comin’ hame,”
And the young heart is loupin’ to hear the dear name,
What tongue like the Doric love’s saft tale can tell,
‘Neath the lang yellow broom, an’ the red heather-bell?

I’m wae for Aul Reekie, her big men o’ print
To Lunnon ha’e gane, to be nearer the mint;
But the coinage o’ brain looks no a’ e haet better,
Though Doric is banish’d frae sang, tale, and letter.

But there’s a’ e thing I’m sure o’—ere lang I maun gang,
Yet aye when I dow I maun lilt a bit sang;
And sae soont’ shall I sleep ‘neath the auld mossy stane,
That I’ll never hear tell when the Doric is gane.

Keenly interested in temperance, anti-slavery campaigns, and worker education, she was also an appalled witness of the industrial “progress” that made her little village one of the most ravaged areas in all of Victorian Britain—the subject of her scathing satire “Our Location.”

Partially blinded by her work at the tambour-loom, Hamilton became totally blind in her sixties and dictated her verse thereafter to James Hamilton, one of her sons. Her narratives and reflective “ballads of memory” (written in Scots as well as English) found a modest but faithful audience, and the success of her “Sketches in Prose of Scotch Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne” may have emboldened her to draft her “Plea,” which appeared in Poems, Essays and Sketches three years before her death in 1875.²

The original “Doric” was a rural, rustic northern dialect of ancient Greek. Hamilton’s “Doric” was the Lallands Scots of her native southwestern Lanarkshire (not the vernacular of northeastern Scotland, its usual sense in present-day use). Hamilton’s national reputation had derived in large part from the success of John Cassell’s publication of her English-language essays in London, so her “plea” was more than a rhetorical ploy:

Fog’i’e, oh, fog’i’e me, auld Scotlan’, my mither!
Like an ill-deedie bairn I’ve ta’en up wi’ anither;
And aften thy dear Doric aside I hae flung.
To busk oot my sang wi’ the proud Southerner tongue.

Thomas Carlyle, on the other hand, as well as semi-expatriates such as W.H. Henley Margaret Oliphant, and Robert Louis Stevenson, profited much more from their willingness to subordinate their natural dialect to the master’s tongue.³

As fellow-cantors in the bare, ruined choirs of Scottish identity, Hamilton summoned ancient icons of Scottish history and culture such as “Wallace the wight” and Robert the Bruce, as well as more recent figures such as the martyred Covenanters (one of whom was an ancestor), the long lineage of unsung singers and balladists, and the more formal poetic tradition of Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, James Hogg, and Robert Burns.

At the end of her poem, of course, as in individual and cultural life, there was silence, but also a still small lifting voice:

... there’s a’ e thing I’m sure o’—ere lang I maun gang,
Yet aye when I dow I maun lilt a bit sang;
And sae soon' shall I sleep 'neath the auld mossy stane, 
That I'll never hear tell when the Doric is gane.

It is obvious why there will always be limited audiences for such poems, for their raison d'être presents difficulties to many who would sympathize in principle. But the glosses given above may help readers "hear" Hamilton's melodic flourishes and grace notes in the language she mourned (["Wallace the wicht,"] "sae pithy an' pawkie," "sense and sly humour an' feeln' sae fit;

to read mither tongue on that mither's fire en;" "Bannockburn / ... turn,

and "winna ken / ... fire en").

Thus understood, "A Plea for the Doric" is a witty and sophisticated poem, at once homely and subtle, angry, and resigned. The exodus of Edinburgh's literary figures to London and conflicts of Scottish history are now distant matters of historical fact, but the patterns Hamilton observed are not—we simply have more current (and more pedantic) names for them: "hybridity," "post-colonialism," and "marginalization," for example—names that express the fates of what Deleuze and Guattari called "minor literatures.

But Hamilton's deeper and more universal point—the achingly ambivalence of assimilation and repression of cultural identity in all its forms—has continued to haunt authors of works in the commercial and imperial "Latin" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It will haunt those who displace us in their turn.

Notes

1 More information on these poets and their works may be found in Florence Boos's Working Class Women Poets in Victorian England: An Anthology (Broadview, 2008), which also contains a bibliography of "Some Little-Educated or Working-Class Victorian Women Poets Who Published Books" (359–51). The "Victorian Working-Class Women Poets Archive," edited by Megan Timney, is now hosted at wwwpenglish.dal.ca, and an "Archive of Working-Class Literature" is under development at Liverpool John Moores University by Helen Rogers and others.

2 During her lifetime, Hamilton published four volumes: Poems and Essays of a Miscellaneous Character on Subjects of General Interest (Glasgow, Edinburgh and London, 1863); Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Praise of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langyaw, Sketches of Local Sceneries and Characters (Edinburgh, London and Glasgow, 1863); Poems and Sketches (Glasgow, 1865); and Poems and Sketches, A Selection from the First Two Volumes, "Poems and Essays" and "Poems and Sketches," with Several New Pieces (Glasgow, 1876). An enlarged version of the latter, Poems, Essays, and Sketches, edited by James Hamilton, was published after her death, in 1880 (reprinted 1885).

3 Hamilton scorned Scotland's geopolitical subordination in "Auld Mither Scotland":

   It's England's meteor flag that burns
   Abune oor battle plains;
   Oor victories, bath by seas an' lan';
   It's England aye that gains.
   It's England mak's an' signs the peace
   Whan nations tire o' fightin';