NOT JUST THE FACTS:
VICTORIAN DETECTIVE FICTION’S
CRITIQUE OF INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that mid-Victorian detective fiction critiques concurrent shifts in Victorian information culture. Detectives in fiction check alibis, investigate clues, and perform acts of detection and ratiocination which link their labor to social procedures of information management. We can read the genre as a response to drastic mid-Victorian changes in the perception of “information.” Specifically, I argue that detective fiction of the 1860s and 70s demonstrates skepticism of the developing mid-Victorian concept of abstract information. Abstract information is content detached from context, supposedly able to exist free from space, materiality, or necessary connection to human meaning. Mid-Victorian detective fiction challenges that perception.

Recovering how mid-Victorian detective fiction embodies social ambivalence towards changing perceptions of information helps us avoid writing a fallacious developmental narrative onto the genre. Detective fiction of the early twentieth century imagines a split between the “rational” and “sensational” material in the genre. The procedures of information management within the novel—gathering and ordering clues, collecting evidence, making deductions—are usually considered “rational” parts of the genre. Reading mid-Victorian novels within this framework, we are apt to see the mid-Victorian detective’s acts of information management as being inherently “rational.” When re-examined through the lens of contemporary information culture, however, we see that information management actually serves in these novels and stories as an indicator of the “sensational.” Rather than tending to advance towards order, as we might expect, mid-Victorian fictions evoke the procedures of information to evoke uncanny
feelings and undermine the apparent conclusions of their detectives. We read a novel or short story from the 1860s and see the use of factual information, such as Robert Audley manipulating a railway timetable or Sergeant Cuff carefully collecting testimony. We tend to think of their endeavors as rational, prototypical examples of detective reasoning. But in making that assumption, we overlook how problematic information was in mid-Victorian society and how self-conscious contemporaries were of its limits and contradictions. What we overlook, in short, is the possibility that “information” in mid-Victorian detective fiction serves as another indicator of the “sensational.” To misread the use of information in mid-Victorian detective fiction is to risk misunderstanding Victorian information culture, as well as the text’s adoption and adaptation of other informational forms.

While all of the texts I examine exhibit skepticism of the perception of abstract information, this dissertation also traces a development in the texts’ attitudes towards information in the 1860s and beyond. Abstract information, each fiction suggests, is not a perfectly accurate concept, but in the later texts I consider, this becomes less of a problem. For Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), abstract information is a deeply problematic idea, and the text sets a trap for us into which we might fall if we fail to understand the alienated nature of such information. Bracebridge Hemyng’s *Telegraph Secrets* (1867) challenges the idea of that information can be disembodied from material contexts, but the novel’s attempt to critique it backfires and creates aesthetic oddities in the text. Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a transitional novel, shows the idea of decontextualized abstract information breaking
down, but this is not problematic. Instead, the novel begins to exploit the possibilities offered by an information age which can imagine information freely acquiring new meaning in different contexts. Finally, the many critics of Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) actively celebrate the aesthetic possibilities offered by the idea of abstract information, creating a proliferating collection of new creative work out of the gap left in the original text.
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The dissertation process is such an inherently collaborative one that it’s difficult in the end to untangle all of the people who helped along the way. The acknowledgments section begins to feel like the final pages of a detective novel. We see the evidence—a dissertation! It bears a name on the title page, but who is implicated? Let’s run through the suspects.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

An 1895 critic in *The Leeds Mercury* is puzzled by the difference between the fictional detectives of the 1890s and the 1860s. 1890s detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Hewitt have a formidable mastery of information: “All the arts, all the sciences, many of the ’ologies and most of the ’ographies, are his, and to them he adds a knowledge of men and things which even the smartest policeman, uniformed or plain, can never hope to acquire” (4). Yet the very perfection of the 1890s detective’s management of information makes him unexciting, according to the critic. We begin the story already knowing that it will end with Holmes or Hewitt solving the mystery. Wilkie Collins or Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s detectives from earlier in the century, on the other hand, “keep their readers on the tenterhooks of suspense and expectation from start to finish,” because we are never sure that the mystery can actually be solved (4). The question asked by the 1890s stories is “how will it be found out?”, but the 1860s stories ask the much more open question, “will it ever be found out at all?” (4).

This critic suggests that 1860s and 1890s detective fiction are distinct because of their representation of information management and interpretation. Unlike the later Holmesian depiction of perfectly decipherable information, the texts of the 1860s leave the question open whether the facts and the investigation will ever lead to meaning.¹

¹ See, for example, Holmes’s description of the legibility of facts in “The Five Orange Pips”: “The ideal reasoner… would, when he had once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it” (Doyle, “The Five Orange Pips” 300). Such an analysis imagines evidence as perfectly decipherable.
Early detective fictions show us non-omniscient detectives, coincidental plots, and broken-off or failed investigations. Why is detective fiction of the 1860s so different from detective fiction of the 1890s? The key difference, as this critic suggests, seems to be in the way these texts imagine the legibility of information.

This dissertation argues that the detective fiction of the 1860s and 70s embodies and critiques contemporaneous developments in the concept of information. Specifically, this project suggests that detective fiction questions a particular aspect of the shift in mid-Victorian information—the new concept of “abstract” information. In this period, content began for the first time to be imaginable as abstract information, existing apart from its context, medium, or form of representation. Geoffrey Nunberg notes the new idea that information is capable of being “liberated and manipulated as a kind of pure essence,” so that “it seems foregone that content will be preserved intact when its material and social supports are stripped away” (107). This perception of information is easy to take for granted in our modern society, since we are accustomed to encountering circulating gigabytes of content. For Victorians, however, it was far from self-evident.

Within the conceptual framework of information, we can read the openness of mid-Victorian detective fiction’s central question—“will it ever be found out at all?”—as a commentary on this new vision of information. The fictions examined in this project show characters attempting to solve crimes using the properties of this new abstract version of information, but even when successful, their investigations showcase the flaws in their methods. Thus, these novels demonstrate skepticism over the social perception of abstract information.
Detective fiction, the literary genre perhaps most overtly engaged in questions of information management, is uniquely placed to take on these conceptual issues. The detective fiction narrative centers on a search to assemble and organize data and use it to reach conclusions. It is surely not accidental that this genre began to grow into its modern form alongside a mid-century shift in Victorian conceptualizations of information. I seek to recover mid-Victorian detective fiction’s engagement with the uniquely turbulent perception of information in mid-Victorian society. I resist reading these early detective texts primarily as proto-typical versions of later literary developments and devices, and seek instead to reconstitute a specific historical attitude toward information in fiction in this time period, even when such understandings may appear counterintuitive to a modern reader.

In order to provide a more detailed context for mid-Victorian uses and perceptions of information, each of my chapters considers a novel or short story collection alongside a non-fiction information technology that bears a thematic importance to the text. I use the term “information technologies” loosely to describe a host of new or changing structures concerned with how information is processed, organized, stored and distributed. My chapters examine Lady Audley’s Secret and railway timetables, Telegraph Secrets and telegraphs, The Moonstone and dictionaries, and The Mystery of Edwin Drood and serialization. The detective texts embody these information technologies in their plots and structures, turning them into parts of their narratives. The fictions even seem to explicitly offer information as a solution to social disorder, since the detective leverages information to detect the criminals and thus to eliminate deviance.
But in adopting procedures of meaning-making from these information technologies, the fictions repeatedly undercut, critique, or complicate the very organizational structures which seem to constitute their meaning.

**Victorian Perception of Abstract Information**

This conceptual shift to the idea of abstract information became evident in the middle of the nineteenth-century throughout Europe. It developed in contrast to a number of older definitions and ways of conceiving of the word “information.” Prior to the mid-Victorian period, information was most commonly spoken of in what Nunberg calls the “particularistic” sense, i.e., concerning some particular fact or event. One 1841 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* defines information in this older sense as “intelligence; notice, news or advice communicated by word or writing,” “knowledge derived from reading or instruction,” and “knowledge derived from the senses or from the operation of the intellectual faculties” (Webster 451). Such common definitions of information—facts, intelligence, knowledge derived from a specific medium and applied to a specific use—are anchored in the particular content which the reader derives. Significantly, all of these definitions include a reference to someone receiving or deriving this content. None imagine content existing, as abstract information supposedly does, regardless of whether there are particular facts communicated and a particular person receiving these facts.

Nor is abstract Victorian information exactly the same as our modern sense of the world, described by Nunberg as its “naturalistic” sense. This understanding is based on a conceptualization of information as bits and bandwidths. This naturalistic sense is often
traced to Claude Shannon’s “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” which imagines the content of the message as irrelevant to the information. Warren Weaver, translating from Shannon’s mathematical proofs, defines information as a unit of choice (i.e., a one or a zero). The naturalistic definition thus splits information from content: “In fact, two messages, one of which is heavily loaded with meaning and the other of which is pure nonsense, can be exactly equivalent, from the present viewpoint, as regards information” (8). This is not precisely the same as Victorian information, but as Richard Menke notes, Victorian information does “anticipate this vision [the naturalistic sense of information] in important respects” (22).²

Instead, the mid-Victorian era conceived of information in a third sense, which Nunberg calls its “abstract” sense. Abstract information is imagined as a new “material” in the world, created when content is separated from context. Stripped of its connection to “space, time, context, matter, and medium,” content becomes abstract information (Menke 19). Nunberg defines abstract information as “a kind of intentional substance that is present in the world, a sense that is no longer closely connected to the use of the verb ‘inform,’ anchored in particular speech acts” (110).

This new definition of abstract information grows from the mid-Victorian era. As Nunberg notes:

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² Specifically, Victorian abstract information lacks this distinction between “content” and “information.” Instead, as I will show, the content itself becomes “information.”
...this abstract sense of the word did not appear in English (or in any other language) until the mid-nineteenth century. Before this period you could not really speak of information in an abstract way. There is a revealing example in Gulliver’s Travels: “For he argued thus: that the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts...” It’s notable that Swift could not say simply that the use of speech was “to receive information”... but could only refer to an aggregation of particular propositions... He had no way, that is, to speak of information as a kind of abstract stuff present in the world, disconnected from the situations that it is about. (111)

This new imagined form of information seems to exist in the world like a new element added to the periodic table; it can be conceived of as a substance in its own right, an “abstract stuff present in the world, disconnected from the situations it is about.” Such a description shows the break between mid-Victorian information and, for example, the eighteenth-century taxonomical system. Information became an object of value independent of its specific applications and contexts, divorced, as Toni Weller argues, from “specific purpose,” and viewable for the first time as “a category in its own right” (5).

Nunberg identifies abstract information as a “substance” and a “stuff,” strange terminology for an abstract concept, but terminology which does reflect the way Victorians imagined abstract information. As a new imagined substance existing in the world, information was associated with certain pseudo-physical properties. In this dissertation, I identify four of these imagined properties of abstract information, culled from Nunberg, James Carey, Richard Menke, and others. Each is the subject of a chapter. These are not the only properties associated with abstract information (Nunberg also

3 Nunberg’s central argument is that these supposed properties of “information” as abstract are directly correlated to the material traits of newspapers, and the institutions and practices surrounding their use (120).
mentions, for example, abstract information’s “boundedness,” and “measurability”), but they are the most immediately relevant to the different literary works I discuss in this project. These properties follow logically from the supposedly context-free nature of information.

All of these properties, it is worth specifying at the outset, are in a sense imaginary or even what we might call “fictional.” They envision an understanding the world which for Victorians often clearly contradicted the actual ways in which factual content operated. Detective fiction, as this dissertation demonstrates, shares this skepticism.

The first property I call the “autonomy” of abstract information. Information could be spoken of as a substance existing in the world, and therefore information in the abstract seemed to gain autonomy, or the capacity of having importance apart from humanity. Nunberg notes that abstract information differs from knowledge, in that abstract information “can exist in the absence of a subject” (121). From this absence comes the idea of information which can exist in opposition to human meaning. Menke cites the example of Mrs. Gradgrind’s deathbed in Hard Times. Mrs. Gradgrind identifies her pain as existing somewhere in the room, where it “circulates… as an external, disembodied fact” (Menke 16). Abstract information supposedly retains value even when it exists apart from or in opposition to the humans who have created and seek to use its content.

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4 My use of the term “autonomy” stems from Nunberg’s, but in addition to this meaning, he also uses it to signify information’s authority more broadly: “the authorizing context is folded into the form of the document itself” (122). For the purposes of clarity, I am focusing specifically on the part of this concept that emphasizes the lack of a human agent, which is in itself a big enough conceptual shift to require its own analysis.
The second property of abstract information is its supposed “disembodiment.” Disembodiment here is used to define information’s imagined ability to exist in a non-physical form. James Carey, for example, notes the new idea of “messages… separated from the physical movement of objects” (157). Abstract information was believed to exist independent of its medium, and therefore it was possible for the first time to imagine information existing without any type of material context—books, newspapers, photographs, etc. The discourse surrounding disembodied information, particularly in regards to the telegraph, tends to celebrate its ability to “flow” from one location to another without needing a material medium.

I call the third property of abstract information “decontextualization.” All abstract information is imagined free of context, but here I use decontextualized information to refer to a specific supposed property of abstract information—the idea that information can be moved from context to context without changing its meaning or interfering with its essential value. In this reading, “bits of information… retain their value even when they are detached from their context and moved about from one place to another” (Nunberg 121). Nunberg associates this property with electronic documents, which are “amenable to extraction and reorganization, and are much easier to dislodge and decontextualize than print documents are” (124). But we can also see it at work in the Victorian era.

The fourth and final property of abstract information which this dissertation considers is its “morselization.” Abstract information brings the suggestion that it can be morselized, or divided up and recombined while remaining essentially the “same.” As
opposed to knowledge, often described holistically, Nunberg compares information to sand or succotash, because it is “essentially corpuscular” (117). Information, in this reading, is composed of “little atoms of content—propositions, sentences, bits, infons, morceaux—each independently detachable, manipulable, and tabulable” (117). Such a vision of information imagines that it can be broken into pieces, delivered in chunks, and then recombined and retains its meaning unchanged.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I explore each of these properties of information in the context both of detective fiction and of a particular new information technology gaining prominence in the mid-Victorian era: the timetable, the telegraph, the dictionary, and serialization, respectively. Each of these technologies, in the mid-Victorian era, relied on one of the supposed properties of abstract information. Each detective fiction I consider seemingly adopts, but actually critiques this property of information.

This project grows out of recent work on information culture—the history of information and its technologies and systems—which has proven itself to be a particularly compelling topic for literary studies in the last few years. The particular engagement of the literature with information history which I trace in this project is an extension of work on information and realism. Criticism such as Alexander Welsh’s *George Eliot and Blackmail* (1985), Richard Menke’s *Telegraphic Realism* (2008), and the articles in the Spring 2014 special issue of *Victorian Studies* (which together cover information technologies as diverse as physics, geometry, urban mapping, and photography), productively use the information age as a lens for understanding literary
realism. My project builds on this work by focusing on detective fiction, the literary
genre most overtly engaged in debates over information.

My emphasis on the new concept of information as abstract likewise grows out of
the body of scholarship considering Victorian literature and information. Menke poses
this emerging new notion of information in the abstract as a problem which literature
seeks to confront. He notes that the conceptualization of such information is a source of
social and textual anxiety:

Nineteenth-century information was not automatically imagined as
separate from the reality of embodied subjects and material objects. In
Victorian fictions, any such separation usually seems perilous and
temporary; the conversion of life to information is often represented as
estranging and violent, and information often returns to haunt the world of
matter and bodies. (23)

This new idea of information as an abstract concept, in other words, is a source of trouble
in the nineteenth-century text. The supposed disembodying and decontextualized
properties of information which we now might be inclined to overlook or take for granted
appear in the Victorian text as “estranging and violent.” Thus, examining such texts
allows us to recover the contested perceptions of nineteenth-century information.

While these critics study high realism, my own intervention is to examine
information alongside detective fiction. The genre would seem to have a particularly
significant role to play in this conversation as the only literary genre which actually uses
information gathering and ordering as the central theme of its narrative. If it has been
largely absent from this conversation before, I argue, it is because it is difficult to see
information clearly in the genre. Menke describes information, as it appears in fictional
texts, in eerie terms which are characteristic of information’s representation in the mid-
Victorian era—perilous, violent, haunting, and ghost-like. To fully understand the mid-Victorian detective novel, we must be prepared to see its use of information as inherently sensational and irrational.

Recovering Victorian attitudes towards abstract information allows us to retrieve the ways in which mid-Victorian detective fiction imagines information. Sherlock Holmes and later detectives declare their acts of information management to be rational, and thus it is particularly hard to see earlier detectives engaging in acts of information management and remember how self-conscious mid-Victorians were of information’s limits and contradictions. If we want to correctly read Robert Audley’s manipulations of the railway timetable or Sergeant Cuff’s careful collection of testimony, we must be prepared to see clues, data, and acts of investigation as dubious or even irrational. Seeing information as sensational and irrational in the mid-Victorian detective novel is particularly difficult, because we have been trained by decades of later detective fiction to see information in the detective novel as “rational.”

Sensational Information in Mid-Victorian Detective Fiction

Detective fiction is often read in terms of a dichotomy. On the one side, we put rationality, facts, the act of detection, the search for clues, and the “puzzle.” On the other, we find material opposed to that rationality—the sensational, the unfathomable, the criminal. “Information,” “facts,” and “knowledge” in the detective novel usually are placed in the “rational” column. However, as this dissertation will show, information acts in fantastic or sensational ways in the 1860s and 1870s detective novel. Using the
contexts and confusions of mid-Victorian information culture, I will demonstrate that the
specific facts and clues on which the “rational” endeavor of detective fiction rests are
actually sensationalized.

The dichotomy between rational and sensational in detective fiction developed in
the “Golden Age” of detective fiction, the early twentieth century. Dorothy Sayers’s 1928
introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime* gives a particularly nuanced version of this
dichotomy. Sayers notes two distinct strands of the detective genre, which she traces
from Poe:

…Poe stands at the parting of ways for detective fiction. From him go the
two great lines of development… the purely Sensational and the purely
Intellectual. In the former, thrill is piled on thrill and mystification on
mystification; the reader is led on from bewilderment to bewilderment, till
everything is explained in a lump in the last chapter. This school is strong
in dramatic incident and atmosphere… it is never dull, but it is sometimes
nonsense. In the other—the purely Intellectual type—the action mostly
takes place in the first chapter or so; the detective then follows up quietly
from clue to clue till the problem is solved, the reader accompanying the
great man in his search and being allowed to try his own teeth on the
material provided. The strength of this school is its analytical ingenuity; its
weakness… its lack of movement and emotion. (Sayers 83)

These two strands, for Sayers, appear separately in many of Poe’s stories, as in, for
example, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” a purely intellectual story consisting partially of
newspaper clippings, presented for the reader to work through like a puzzle. The strands
can also appear together, as in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a story which solves
the horrifically violent murders of two women in a locked room. Such a story, Sayers
argues, fuses these two strands: “the reader’s blood is first curdled by some horrible and
apparently inexplicable murder or portent; the machinery of detection is then brought in
to solve the mystery and punish the murderer” (73). In other words, the sensational crime exists in opposition to the rational act of detection.

In 1860s and 70s detective fiction, however, this dichotomy is not yet in place. Reading the 1860s detective as dealing with an inherently different cultural context than later fictions broadens our understanding of the genre. For example, it helps us explain the curious absence of the omniscient detective in mid-Victorian detective fiction. The all-seeing, all-knowing detective, the true proto-Sherlock, had already stepped onto the stage in the 1840s, essentially fully-formed. While his adventures are brief, Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin is already the stereotypical detective who would later be reinvented by the Edwardian period. Like Holmes, Dupin is able to process information quickly and deeply. He is already the 1895 description of an ideal detective. He is, in short, already Sherlock Holmes. (Or, of course, Sherlock Holmes is already Dupin.) Yet Dupin is an anomaly in mid-Victorian detective fiction, an exception to the mid-Victorian detective pattern.

In the 1860s, in contrast, the detectives are not perfect reasoning machines, and their careful collection and ordering of information often does not lead them to the truth. Though we have the fictional option of a great, all-seeing, all-powerful detective, he does not immediately step onto center stage. Instead of the Holmes model of complete information management, mid-Victorian detective fiction emphasizes the uncertain and contested nature of information processing. Just within the four novels and short story collections I consider at length in this project, we see information breaking down. One detective creates a reasoned, logical argument, explaining all of the available facts,
halfway through the novel, but his explanation is wrong, and he disappears until the end of the novel (*The Moonstone*). Another detective launches a long investigation collecting evidence on the murder of his missing friend, only to later discover that his friend is alive and the messenger simply decided not to deliver his friend’s letter (*Lady Audley’s Secret*). Other detectives only achieve their mission by a series of unlikely coincidences and some convenient eavesdropping (*Telegraph Secrets*). It would not be fair to form a definite opinion of Datchery’s omniscience in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, since the novel is unfinished, but Datchery marks his clues with chalk marks of varying sizes, a strategy which seems a far cry from Holmes’s virtuosic and instantaneous readings of crime scenes.

The reason that the detectives of the 1860s and 70s are so inept is because they respond to a society skeptical of abstract information. An omniscient detective, easily manipulating information, is not the most relevant articulation of such an age. The mid-century also lacks the Watson figure, who first appears as the narrator of “The Murders at the Rue Morgue.” In the context of mid-Victorian information culture, his absence becomes clear. Without an omniscient detective, the Watson figure is not really needed.

**History of the Rational/Sensational Dichotomy in Criticism**

To understand why it is now difficult to see Victorian acts of detection as not being fully aligned with the rational strand, it is necessary to realize how deeply entrenched we are in a criticism which sees detection as a rational act. The strands which Sayers identifies in nineteenth-century detective fiction are very much a product of
twentieth-century debates about the purpose of the genre.\(^5\) Denied the label of “literary” in the period of high modernism, some authors tried to redeem detective fiction by stressing what R. Austin Freeman calls the purely “intellectual satisfaction” the genre offers (11).\(^6\) Detective fictions in the early twentieth century were often compared to puzzles. Willard Huntington Wright, for example, writes in 1927 that “the detective novel does not fall under the head of fiction in the ordinary sense, but belongs rather in the category of riddles: it is, in fact, a complicated and extended puzzle cast in fictional form” (35). H. Douglas Thomson similarly cautions in 1931 that the author of detective fiction must develop the plot carefully to avoid “the Minotaur of the Obvious, Sensationalism and his other enemies” (139).

“Puzzle story” devices tend to buttress the perceived rationality of the information in the detective story, since clues and acts of fictional detection are explicitly linked to the possibility of rational reasoning. Detective fiction of the “puzzle story” type relies on the idea that the plot is rational and internally consistent, a puzzle which can be reasoned out logically by a discerning reader. Such stories and novels accordingly often encouraged the reader to work out the crime, the way they might solve a riddle or a crossword. Novels and stories in the 1920s and 30s sometimes even included a direct “challenge to the reader,” a blank page near the ending that invited readers to try solving the mystery before reading the novel’s denouement (Greene 365). Other novels indicated clues with red paper or with a sealed “clue index,” or encouraged readers to become

\(^5\) In Sayers’s defense, her analyses of mid-Victorian detective fiction often deliberately blur or challenge this dichotomy in a way which was hardly characteristic of her time.

\(^6\) Howard Haycraft’s *The Art of the Mystery Story*, from which these sources are drawn, also gives an overview and analysis of this critical trend.
detectives by including “charts, maps, plans, timetables, and lists of all sorts” (365).

Facts, in such stories, must be associated with logic, or it would be impossible for readers to solve the puzzle.

Because of this tendency to see information in detective fiction as “rational,” early critics tended to read works of mid-Victorian detective fiction as being more or less effective examples of the later trend toward the intellectual strand. Wright, for example, states that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is “a straight-away detective story which might almost be used as a model for this type of fiction” (44). Similarly, E. M. Wrong compares *The Moonstone* to *The Woman in White*, and finds *The Moonstone* “more orthodox because more of a pure puzzle” (21).

We now at least professedly see such rhetoric as anachronistic. Martin Kayman, for example, cautions that this type of analysis “collapses and rewrites the period prior to Holmes as a mere anticipation whose significance is valued only through a retrospective teleology” (*From Bow Street to Baker Street* 105). Still, the rational/sensational dichotomy has proven surprisingly resilient throughout different types of criticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Tzvetan Todorov’s 1977 *The Poetics of Prose* essentially elaborates on Sayers’s argument about the split development of the sensational and intellectual threads in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Todorov argues that there are actually two stories in detective fiction—the original story of the crime, and the second story of the investigation. The first story has already ended before the story of the investigation begins. This second story is “a story which has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime” (Todorov
This interpretation, still an influential one, splits the irrational crime and the rational act of detection into two narratives which never touch. The realm of sensational supposedly is located in the unseeable, unknowable first story, while the main business of the text is a calm and rational process of assembling the data and reasoning out the solution, disconnected from any fantastical elements.

Later criticism shifts the focus from detective fiction’s narrative structure to questions of genre, ideology, and identity, but these developments do little to revise the foundational dichotomy of the genre. Genealogies of the genre often move from Poe to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle via the crime writing of Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. The work such genealogies does is valuable, but they do tend to have the side-effect of reinforcing a developmental narrative which reads 1860s detective fiction as being engaged in the same essential questions as 1890s detective fiction. See, for example, the mostly chronological structure of *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003), edited by Martin Priestman. A chapter like Martin A. Kayman’s “The Short Story from Poe to Chesterton” builds a developmental narrative into its presuppositions. In this chapter, Kayman reads the mid-Victorian detective “Waters” as a precursor to the rational strand of detective fiction:
The insistence that the story is dealing with facts also constitutes, in a narratological sense, the fundamental structure of the more classic puzzle-solving ‘detective’ genre, in that the test the story sets itself is that the tale the detective eventually tells does correspond to the fragmentary ‘facts’ which the narrator has displayed objectively before us as the brute material of the world. (Kayman, “The Short Story from Poe to Chesterton” 42)

Kayman elsewhere nuances the difference between Victorian and twentieth-century detectives in important ways, but moments such as this one do point out the tempting nature of the dichotomy.

The dichotomy appears in modern criticism in a range of different contexts. Kathryn Oliver Mills’s 2007 essay on “Duality: The Human Nature of Detective Fiction” uses Baudelaire’s concepts of man’s opposing faculties of the “head” and the “heart” as a frame for the dualities of detective fiction. Mills’s concept of the “heart” includes human nature, a concern with intuition and the psyche, and “something eternal” (178). The “head,” in contrast, includes only “hard facts” and their detection (176). Such overt reference to the dichotomy is unusual, and we more frequently find it referenced in passing, as in LeRoy Panek’s 2011 study Before Sherlock Holmes: How Magazines and Newspapers Invented the Detective Story, in which he notes, for example, that “In 1856 Collins once more combined crime and sensation in ‘The Diary of Anne Rodway’… But this time he added a bit of detective work…” (112). This seems to suggest that the sensational and the rational act as independent strands, even when they coexist.

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7 A possible exception to this critical trend is D. A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police (1988), which gives a description of the “agentless” and uncanny detective function in the genre which does offer a possibility for expanding the dichotomy’s parameters (44). Miller’s readings, particularly of Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White, do sometimes show information as sensational—Marian Halcombe, for example, as she gathers evidence of the plot against Laura, “literally writes herself into a fever” (150).
The emphasis on the detective figure as a master of science and an expert reader of data also serves to strengthen the perceived link between rationality and the detective’s endeavors. Such readings are perhaps triggered by Ronald Thomas’s 1999 *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Thomas suggests that the nineteenth century medicalization of crime “corresponded to the literary detective’s development into a kind of master diagnostician, an expert capable of reading the symptoms of criminal pathology in the individual and the social body” (*Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* 3).

It is not my intention here to break down this dichotomy altogether or to critique its use in all discussion of detective fiction. But I do wish to demonstrate how pervasive this dichotomy is in criticism of the genre and suggest that it would be well to exercise caution when applying this reading retroactively to mid-Victorian texts, written half a century before this dichotomy was formulated.

A fuller understanding of the contexts which cause mid-Victorian detectives to manage information in ways no longer familiar to us will also help us more fully acknowledge the place of these fictions in the detective canon. Some critics have attempted to break out of the rational/irrational dichotomy by redefining 1860s texts as “crime fiction” rather than “detective fiction.” In *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (2007), for example, Maurizio Ascari adopts “crime fiction” as his category of choice, allowing him to recover the sensation aspects of the genre, which are often hidden because “we tend to associate detection with the rational search for clues and a culprit” (18). Christopher Pittard, with similar goals, takes a
different tact by defining detective fiction very narrowly as a genre which didn’t develop until the 1890s, as a way to sidestep criticism which “berates Wilkie Collins for failing to be Agatha Christie, or that reads Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*… as capable of a definitive solution somehow inscribed in its existing pages” (221).

Such redefinition allows these critics to examine Victorian detective fiction in a broader context. They risk a different anachronism, however, for we know that Victorians of the 1860s did in fact regularly refer to “detective fiction.” Victorian use of such a label, moreover, often associates such fiction with sensation fiction and mentions its “puzzle” aspect, without making a dichotomy out of these elements. An 1862 reviewer of Albany Fonblanque’s novel *A Tangled Skein* compares it to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and calls both novels “detective fiction,” stating that “detective fiction is still in the ascendant, and this latest specimen is a good one” (“New Novels” 3). The reviewer adds that *A Tangled Skein*, “like all novels of its class… is composed of an elaborately-constructed puzzle, as elaborately taken to pieces” and even suggests that “novelty is almost impossible to the writer of detective and sensation fiction” (“New Novels” 3).

While mentions of detective fiction in the press certainly do increase as the century progresses, this early review suggests that detective fiction in the 1860s was already a field recognizable enough to have its own clichés and conventions. Similarly, an 1870 article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* notes that:

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8 Modern critics sometimes incorrectly put the origin of the term “detective fiction” in the 1880s, quoting R. F. Stewart’s *And Always a Detective: Chapters on the History of Detective Fiction* (1980) which traces the origin of the term to an 1886 *Saturday Review* article titled “Detective Fiction” (*Purity* 8). Yet the increased digitization of the Victorian press makes it quite clear that “detective fiction” was a recognizable term and category, with fixed conventions, in the 1860s.
We learn that the mysterious body whose preterhuman sagacity and marvellous organization are so dear to popular fiction—the detective police—actually consisted up to the middle of the year 1869 of fifteen persons only, a number hardly sufficient to meet the constant demands made upon the force by Miss Braddon, Mr. Wilkie Collins, and others of the same school. (“Occasional Notes” 4)

Again, we find the implication that the genre of popular fiction featuring detectives had already become familiar and recognizable long before the 1890s.

For the purposes of this project, my definition of “detective fiction” will follow the description suggested by these early sources. Such a definition can perhaps be best summed up as a piece of fiction which involves both a crime and the act of its detection. If the novels and stories I study here might not be considered “detective fiction” in the strictest modern definition, it is because the genre’s use of information processing was such a contested concept during the Victorian era.

Arc of the Project

“Organizing Organization: Fictions of Order in Timetables, Comic Spoofs, and Lady Audley’s Secret” tackles one new “property” of supposedly abstract information—the idea that information in the abstract can exist autonomously, acting apart from human needs. This is particularly evident in the Victorian timetable and in collections of timetables such as Bradshaw’s Railway Guide. Timetables flatten and dehumanize a complex physical system, and were, moreover, difficult for Victorian readers to use,

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9 This definition is similar to the structuring definition of Victorian Detective Fiction (1966), the catalogue of Dorothy Glover and Graham Greene’s collection of these novels, which is still one of the most thorough bibliographies of mid-century texts. In his introduction to the collection, John Carter states that it “substantially conforms” to his own definition of a detective story as a story which “must be mainly or largely occupied with detection and… contain[ing] a proper detective, whether amateur or professional” (xiii).
leading to a perceived inverse relationship between information and humanity. Texts discussing timetables in the mid-Victorian era reinforce this sense of alienation. Texts often describe *Bradshaw’s Railway Guide* in figurative language, while comic spoof stories show characters driven to madness by reading the timetable and losing the ability to distinguish the timetable’s places and numbers from reality.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), a novel about Robert Audley forming a timeline of Lady Audley’s life, initially seems to embrace time and space at the main indicators of meaning, mirroring the strategies of a timetable. A closer examination of the novel’s internal timetables and the way it speaks more broadly about trains and timekeeping suggests that the novel actually brings in timetables to increase its sensationalism. The novel ultimately uses timetables, the symbol of human alienation, to undermine the comfort of the novel’s conclusion—for using a timetable in one’s investigation, in this period, could never really bring human meaning.

“Embodied Electrics: Materiality and Presence in Telegrams and *Telegraph Secrets*” considers telegraphs alongside *Telegraph Secrets*, a little-studied 1867 short story collection by Bracebridge Hemyng. With the new abstract concept of information came the idea that information could exist disembodied, free from material form. The telegraph, which transmits messages but not physical objects, relies on this new concept of information. Alongside the discourse celebrating the telegraph’s disembodying properties we find a competing discourse deeply concerned over the materiality of the telegraph. *Telegraph Secrets* joins with this discourse in a narrative which repeatedly emphasizes the material nature of telegraphic communication. The operator’s increasing
visibility, the fact that telegrams are often delayed or intercepted, or must be carried by hand to their final destination, are a subversive reminder of the mediated nature of telegraphic communication.

The critique Telegraph Secrets makes is not, however, as effective as that made by Lady Audley’s Secret, for the emphasis on the embodiment of the technology begins to contradict itself. In attempting to reassert the presence of the material, the stories often slide into more extreme, even grotesque embodiments. Characters believed to be far away coincidentally appear and overhear key information. A man writes a telegram in code and then becomes a coded version of himself, inexplicably speaking in riddles and rhyming slang. The operator transmits a message and then coincidentally wanders to his customer’s house. The collection as a whole, meanwhile, reiterates plot devices, symbols and character patterns, undermining its efforts to assert physical particularity, and instead presenting us with a narrative world where bodies are as fluid and malleable as supposedly disembodied telegraphic information.

“Weighing Words: Hybridity and Quotation in The Moonstone and the New English Dictionary” examines the Oxford English Dictionary, called in this era the New English Dictionary, alongside Wilkie Collins’s 1868 novel The Moonstone. Both the novel and the dictionary rely on practices of taking quotations out of context and putting them into a new context to forge meaning. The dictionary sought to become more “scientific” by including detailed etymologies of word use, marked by specific quotes pulled from thousands of print sources. The difficulties of collecting, selecting, and
controlling these quotes point to the ways in which decontextualizing information causes it to break down.

*The Moonstone* initially seems to embrace a similar structure of meaning-making, as the narrative is supposedly made out of the first-person quotes of different characters, deliberately pulled from the full context of their imagined life histories. But the narrative also challenges these structures by demonstrating the many ways in which quotations can change meaning out of context. The novel ultimately ends up disproving an easy decontextualization of information but embracing the ways in which information takes on new meaning in different contexts. The text’s best detective characters are the most nationally, racially, and linguistically hybridized, showing they have acquired new and useful contexts. Ultimately, the novel suggests, the new meanings which a quote takes in different contexts adds to its value.

“The Shortened Serial: Indeterminacy, Interactivity, and the Many Ends of *Edwin Drood*” considers the reader response to Charles Dickens’s final 1870 novel alongside serialization, an older information technology, but one which rapidly expanded during the Victorian era. Serialization relies on the fiction that information can be freely morselized without changing the ways we respond to it. In practice, however, serialized literature created a creative, authoritative reader response, as readers used the space between monthly parts to create their own theories of the novel.

The reader response to *A Mystery of Edwin Drood* demonstrates the ways in which the morselization of information dramatically changes its reception. Dickens died halfway through writing the novel, leaving this serialized work unfinished, and readers
over the years produced hundreds of adaptations, continuations, and theorizations about
the novel’s ending. For this part of the project, I analyze over 400 theories and
completions from 1870-1939, using both statistical and digital humanities tools, to show
how theorization on the novel expands, integrates diverse discourses, and becomes
increasingly creative over time. Compared to the skepticism of Lady Audley’s Secret, the
response to The Mystery of Edwin Drood shows increased acceptance of the myths of the
abstract information age, and a problem in information transmission converted into a
carnivalesque celebration of readerly autonomy.

While all of the texts I examine exhibit skepticism of the idea that information can
exist in the abstract, this dissertation also traces a development in the texts’ attitudes
towards information in the 1860s. Abstract information, each novel suggests, is not a
perfectly accurate concept, but in the later texts I consider, this becomes less of a
dilemma. For Lady Audley’s Secret, abstract information is a deeply problematic idea,
and the text sets a trap for us into which we might fall if we fail to understand the
alienated nature of such information. Telegraph Secrets challenges the idea of
disembodiment, but the novel’s attempt to critique it backfires and creates aesthetic
oddities in the text. The Moonstone, a transitional novel, shows the idea of
decontextualization breaking down, but this is not problematic. Instead, the novel begins
to exploit the possibilities offered by an information age which can imagine information
freely acquiring new contexts. Finally, the many critics of Edwin Drood begin actively
celebrating the aesthetic possibilities offered by the failure of morselized information to
sustain meaning, creating a proliferating collection of new creative work out of the gap left in the original text.
CHAPTER 2
ORGANIZING ORGANIZATION: FICTIONS OF ORDER IN TIMETABLES, COMIC SPOofs, AND LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET

Introduction

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1862), Robert Audley consults “a volume of Bradshaw” to find his way to the isolated asylum where he will place Lady Audley, the woman who bigamously married his uncle and, he believes, killed her first husband to conceal her crime (382). Unexpectedly, the following description of what Robert Audley learns from Bradshaw reads less like a sensation novel and more like a list of travel instructions:

…Villebrumeuse lay out of the track of all railway traffic, and was only approachable by diligence from Brussels. The mail for Dover left London Bridge at nine o’clock, and could be easily caught by Robert and his charge, as the seven o’clock up-train from Audley reached Shoreditch at a quarter past eight. Travelling by the Dover and Calais route, they would reach Villebrumeuse by the following afternoon or evening. (382–3)

Specific travel times saturate this passage—the 7:00 pm train reaches London at 8:15 pm, allowing the travelers to catch the 9:00 pm mail stagecoach, which takes them to the steamer boat. The times are specific enough that we could imagine a reader replicating the journey just by following the instructions in the novel. Similarly, the novel elsewhere tells us that “an express for London left Wildernsea at a quarter-past one,” that Lady Audley “started for London by the 12:40 train,” and that when Robert misses the Liverpool express by half an hour, he must “wait an hour and a quarter for a slow train to take him to his destination” (251, 142, 97). References to such specific times haunt the
text, calling us again and again away from the fictional narrative of the sensation novel to the non-fiction genre of the railway timetable.

Timetables were a development of the new Victorian information age, and *Bradshaw’s Guide* was the most popular and comprehensive compilation of railway timetables used in the Victorian era. Both the individual timetables and the guide Robert Audley uses were the topic of debate and skepticism. The novel engages in these debates when it shows characters utilizing this new information technology.

Just as the novel explicitly references railway timetables, it also more implicitly suggests that time and space are the most essential factors to consider when making meaning. The railway timetable marks its meaning with specific indicators of time and space—the table gives us a list of places and a list of times when the locomotive will depart from those places. For a traveler on a train, it is not apparently necessary to know the exact route of the track, the workings of the locomotive, the name of the conductor, or any other of dozens of possible pieces of knowledge about the journey. Instead, the timetable suggests, the only important information is the train’s departure and arrival in space.

The novel references time and space repeatedly in Robert Audley’s investigation of the disappearance of his friend George Talboys. He suspects that his young step-aunt, Lady Audley, is actually Helen Talboys, George’s wife (and thus a bigamist and possibly a murderer). To solve the mystery, Robert creates a timetable. He travels across Great Britain, tracing the life of Helen Talboys forwards in time and the chronology of Lady Audley backwards, proving that they are the same person and thereby establishing her
motive for killing his friend, her first husband. As Robert says to one of his contacts, “This is the twenty-fourth of February, fifty-nine. I want to know every record of her life between to-night and the February of the year fifty-three…” (220). Robert traces the history of “Lady Audley” backward to August, 1854, at which point he decides, “I can go no further in this backward investigation of my lady’s antecedents… I must begin at the other end—I must begin at the other end, and discover the history of Helen Talboys…” (Braddon 240). He eventually closes the gap between Helen Talboys and Lady Audley so that there is only a hole of forty-eight hours between their chronologies. He closes this gap, appropriately enough, using the evidence of a rail label on her suitcase, which has her fake name pasted over a label with her real name. Having established this timetable of her movements, Robert is able to fix Lady Audley’s identity as that of Helen Talboys in what may seem to be a vindication of the timetable’s epistemological structures. The novel’s attitude towards timetables is, however, far more complicated.

When we examine how Victorians read and talked about timetables, we see that Robert Audley’s use of timetables to fix Lady Audley’s identity would have been read as a sensational and troubling act. Seeing Victorian skepticism of timetables in the mid-nineteenth century shows us how the novel subtly undermines the credibility of Robert Audley’s investigation, casts doubt on the link between a person’s location in time and space and their full human story, and ultimately destabilizes the novel’s “successful” ending. If the critique the novel makes is not immediately apparent to us, it is most likely because timetables would later become familiar social forms. Furthermore, timetables are a staple of the later “rational” strand of detective fiction, providing fodder for early
twentieth-century crime authors who wished to offer their readers fair but baffling puzzles. We should resist the temptation, however, to read the use of timetables in *Lady Audley’s Secret* as being inherently “rational.”

Specifically, Victorian commentary on timetables shows us that they were particularly concerned with the abstract nature of the information which appeared in the railway timetable. One consequence of the new concept of information supposedly existing in the abstract—i.e., content being detachable from context—was that it was suddenly possible to imagine information having value apart from humanity. It began to be perceived as Nunberg’s “intentional substance that is present in the world” (110). Autonomous information supposedly exists and has value in the world, even when it is only tenuously connected with human meaning and motives.¹⁰ I trace abstract information’s disconnection from “humanity” across a range of imagined human experience—the question of how information relates to human bodies, how it exists in human experience, and the ways it facilitates (or fails to facilitate) human attempts to make meaning.

The timetable supposedly helps individuals navigate their personal space and travel plans and form human connections, but actually the timetable is radically disconnected from humanity in a variety of ways. The average Victorian, using a

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¹⁰ By way of contrast, Menke points to Charles Babbage’s vision of information offered in his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837). Babbage imagines a world of information, but a world in which that information is still deeply invested with human meaning. As Menke states: “When atoms act as bits for Babbage, they contain a different sort of information from the kind that we digital beings might expect: not numbers or coded electric pulses… but the infinitesimal imprints of human actions and the echoes of our ‘sentiments’” (25). This 1837 vision of information still imagines information divisible into bits, but these bits are still deeply tied to the human context which created them. The data offered by timetables, in contrast, was often read by contemporaries as being at odds with human meaning and ways of understanding. Rather than being an imprint of human motives, the timetable became alien.
timetable for perhaps the first time (for train travel was still relatively new in the 1860s),
found a system which repeatedly highlighted its disconnection from humanity. A complex physical system of real objects, like carriages, conductors, and human travelers, was represented in a condensed, flattened chart of times and spaces. Timetables were often collected together in massive books such as *Bradshaw’s Railway Guide*, and the traveler would have to locate his specific train within hundreds of pages of superfluous information, stored but not immediately of human use. Even the simple process of reading a timetable would have reinforced human disconnection, for timetables were often seen as difficult to read, since they were shaped to maximize information storage rather than to be friendly to human eyeballs.

Victorian writing about timetables and timetable collections like *Bradshaw’s* reflects this human disconnection. In genres like comic spoof stories and railway guidebooks, timetables are frequently described in figurative or hyperbolic language, associated with madness, and represented as constantly in danger of breaking down and sliding into the irrational. The tenuous link between the timetable’s supposedly autonomous information and the human usefulness of this information is repeatedly revealed to be a gulf where human motives and movements founder.

*Lady Audley’s Secret* joins this discourse, bringing in timetables to increase the sensationalism of the novel. In other words the timetable in the mid-Victorian detective

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11 We are apt to take the difficulties of reading timetables for granted now. However, we have also developed new ways to avoid the problem, showing that the social anxiety attendant on timetables’ disconnection with humanity has not entirely faded. The “Plan My Trip” option on many public transit and online mapping websites has to some extent made the timetable obsolete. Rather than considering a range of train times and zeroing in on the one we need, we have created algorithms which essentially enable us to ignore the presence of information superfluous to our particular journeys.
text symbolizes not “rational” order and organization, but points instead to a particularly subtle and dangerous human disconnection inherent in abstract information. To overlook this fact, in the case of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, is to miss the novel’s skepticism of Robert Audley’s procedures for making meaning. Even as Robert Audley attempts to create a timetable to fix Lady Audley’s guilt, the novel repeatedly undermines the idea that timetables are correlated with human meaning.

Furthermore, if timetables lead away from human connection, then Robert Audley’s investigation is entirely undermined. Lady Audley’s imprisonment in a madhouse might indeed be the successful conclusion to Robert Audley’s project of creating a timetable of her life, but a timetable, the novel reminds us, is incapable of encompassing the full human story. The novel thus subtly encourages us to be suspicious of its own professed structures of meaning. Timetables emerge as disciplinary structures, capable of controlling humans, rather than being controlled by them. Ultimately, even the implied reader becomes caught in the novel’s discipline. Just as Robert Audley and Lady Audley’s stories show these characters being increasingly socialized by time, the narrative itself also slowly adopts a more precise time structure, intensifying the sensational nature of the timetable’s information.

The Timetable as Expression of Human Disconnection

Even while *Lady Audley’s Secret* shows Robert Audley forming timetables to increase his understanding, it suggests a disconnection between such an interpretive structure and the full “story” of human movements and motives which he seeks. Early in
his investigation, Robert Audley embraces the interpretive structure of the timetable to gain insight into the disappearance of his friend George Talboys. Robert says to himself that he shall “draw up a record of all that has occurred between our going down to Essex and tonight, beginning at the very beginning” (Braddon 99). Like a timetable, this “JOURNAL OF FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEORGE TALBOYS, INCLUSIVE OF FACTS WHICH HAVE NO APPARENT RELATION TO THAT CIRCUMSTANCE” is drawn up in a list of short units of information, carefully numbered and ordered chronologically:

I write to Alicia, proposing to take George down to the Court. Alicia writes, objecting to the visit on the part of Lady Audley. We go to Essex in spite of this objection. I see my lady. My lady refuses to be introduced to George that particular evening on the score of fatigue… (100)

Robert’s list shapes a strict chronology around physical spaces, signaling the connection between Robert’s strategy and the timetable. Robert even marks down the information which seems particularly relevant. He goes through his list, “stopping at some of them with a pencilled cross,” a common practice of timetable readers (101).

Significantly, however, this table leaves him baffled. It does begin to hint at the truth—a prior association between his step-aunt Lady Audley and his friend George Talboys which culminates in her responsibility for his disappearance—but Robert finds it inherently unsatisfying. Instead, Robert says to himself: “It’s as dark as midnight from first to last… and the clue to the mystery must be found either at Southampton or in Essex” (Braddon 101). Robert’s timetable (much like a railroad timetable) fails to offer him what he really seeks, knowledge of his friend’s whereabouts. Instead, much like a
real timetable, it leaves Robert with only a limited understanding that his next trip should be to Southampton or Essex.

Repeatedly, we find the novel making this same move—simultaneously privileging the timetable as a key to meaning-making and showing timetables which lead away from human meaning. The specific times and dates in the text give it an appearance of rationality and precision, but this appearance gives way under further scrutiny. When we use the novel’s extensive internal time indicators to examine the events of the novel in chronological or story time, rather than by the narrative, we find that all these specific times really reveal is contested meaning and missed connections. To take only the most salient example, we know details for almost every hour of the day of George’s disappearance, September 7, 1858. The novel works to reconstruct a timeline of this day, but the timeline itself (table 1) reveals the characters working at cross-purposes:
### Table 1. Timetable of events of day of attack.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>George</th>
<th>Robert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Morning</strong></td>
<td>Robert asks George, “Shall we go up by the express…?” George suggests that they stroll around and “go up to town by the train that leaves here at 6:15 in the evening” (75). They order dinner for 4 pm, and leave to go fishing. Five minutes after they leave, Sir Michael calls with an invitation to dinner (81).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Afternoon</strong></td>
<td>Robert and George fish, and Robert falls asleep.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 pm</td>
<td>“As the church clock struck two” George gets up and walks to Audley Court (78). George reaches the house and learns that Lady Audley is in the lime-tree avenue.</td>
<td>Robert sleeps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Late Afternoon</strong></td>
<td>Lady Audley and George meet and argue, and she pushes him down the well. She waits for “nearly a quarter of an hour” but the cry is not repeated (394). George is “stunned and dazed for a few minutes” but rouses himself, and climbs up the well for “upwards of half an hour” (443).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 pm</td>
<td>George reaches the top of the well and hides in the bushes. It is now 4 pm (423).</td>
<td>Robert awakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:15 pm</td>
<td>George hides in the bushes in Audley Court.</td>
<td>Robert returns to Sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert knocks on door to uncle’s house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 pm</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>After slight delay, he goes to railway station, and learns that “no train is expected for another half hour” (82).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7 pm</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert arrives for dinner at Audley Court.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 pm</td>
<td>Luke brings George home.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 pm</td>
<td>Robert leaves Audley Court.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 pm</td>
<td>Luke gets George brandy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late night-early</td>
<td>Luke and George walk together to see surgeon, and then they go to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morning</td>
<td>railway station.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning</td>
<td>George catches 8:30 am Brentwood train.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert catches the earliest train from Audley.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The narrative painstakingly records different hours, locations and spaces, and yet ultimately, this information only represents the breakdown of meaning, shown by how the character’s timelines are the inverse of each other, never intersecting. Robert sleeps while his friend is being attacked not far away, and George hides in the bushes while Robert is looking for him at the railway station. Robert eats dinner at Audley Court, and while he is dining, George leaves his hiding space at Audley Court. Both men catch early morning trains up to London, but from different towns. The striking thing about this pattern is not how much time and space bring meaning, but how purposeless space and time are during this day. All the text’s wealth of chronological and spatial indicators only drive Robert and George further away from any sort of human connection.

Robert and George continue to operate at cross-purposes during the remainder of the crucial time before George leaves England. Robert tries to go to Liverpool, and learns that “the Liverpool express had started half an hour before he reached the station, and he had to wait an hour and a quarter for a slow train to take him to his destination” (Braddon 97). Robert is upset by the delay, thinking that “half a dozen vessels might sail for Australia while he roamed up and down the long platform, tumbling over trucks and porters, and swearing at his ill-luck” (98). He arrives at Liverpool at 8 pm. George had
actually been in Liverpool, but left during Robert’s train ride at 3:30 (98–9). The more closely we look at the novel’s use of the timetable, the less rational and orderly these timetables appear.

Unexpected typos and minor mistakes also undermine the text’s supposed emphasis on timetables. Even the crucial date itself, “September 7,” is an uncertain one. Robert repeatedly mentions it as the day of George’s disappearance, telling Lady Audley’s father that he believes that George “died on the 7th of September last,” for example (Braddon 170). But at one point he tells Lady Audley that “George Talboys left Essex, or disappeared from Essex, on the 6th of September last” a typo which further muddles our sense of the effectiveness of spatio-temporal indicators (140). This combines with other minor inaccuracies, such as the fact that at the train station, a little after 6 pm, Robert is told that “no train is expected for another half hour,” even though George and Robert had that morning planned to “go up to town by the train that leaves here at 6:15 in the evening.” (82, 75). The novel’s internal chronologies are in constant flux.

The novel thus uses timetables to subtly signify human disconnection. But why use timetables at all? Why adopt the timetable’s procedures and then subtly undermine

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12 According to the chronology of the novel, Robert writes to Alicia about visiting Audley Court on August 30, 1858 (Braddon 50). The “return of post” brings a refusal from Alicia; therefore, the day is probably August 31 (51). Robert and George leave London “the next day,” or on September 1, and reach Audley village in time for dinner (52). The following day, presumably September 2, Phoebe takes the first train to London to send the telegraph message, which Lady Audley receives a little past ten o’clock, and she leaves immediately to “catch the express” (59). Robert and George spend “three days in Essex,” September 3-6 (61). The following day Robert has a headache and they stay at the inn, and that evening they go down to see the portrait (65). The following day is the day of the attempted murder, September 7. Therefore, it is possible, as character in the novel frequently mention, that the attempted murder is indeed September 7, but the “three days in Essex” are particularly ambiguous, because of course Robert and George had already spent a day in Essex, the day of the telegram and Lady Audley and Sir Michael’s departure. We must count the three days after that day in order to make the chronology fit.
them? The novel, I’d argue, actually enters into the social debate over information to critique the supposedly “autonomous” quality of the railway timetable’s information. In doing so, it alludes to a very specific set of social anxieties around this information technology.

Victorian timetables also demonstrate a disconnection between information and humanity, showing why timetables are such a valuable tool for Lady Audley’s Secret’s portrayal of disconnection. For early Victorians, even the idea of a chart about to predict precise times of arrival and departure was a new development. The word “timetable” was applied in its modern meaning, “a chart detailing the times of departure and arrival of trains or, later, buses, trams, etc., at successive stations or stops,” by the London & Birmingham Railway in 1838 (“Timetable, N.”). Jack Simmons has noted that times were first announced at stations and in newspapers, but timetables gradually took hold as the primary convention for conveying the information, and gained steadily in popularity as the century progressed. The rise was gradual, and Simmons notes that Liverpool and Manchester preferred the “scheme of departures,” which did not specify times of arrival, until 1843, while in 1851, the South Yorkshire Railway’s so-called timetable “did not give the times of any trains and added, for the more thorough discouragement of passengers, ‘no guarantee of punctuality’” (183).

The most obvious disconnection between humanity and the budding timetable form is that timetables were not particularly physically easy to read. The form was designed to maximize information, but often this came at the cost of human use. Reading information in a table would not have come naturally to all nineteenth-century readers.
Mike Esbester notes that while timetable designs drew on “existing tabular conventions” including familiar ledgers and calendars, timetables did not come with instructions, so readers had to deduce how they worked from their prior experience with matrix organizational forms (“Nineteenth-Century Timetables” 163). While these forms would have been familiar to upper-class and business readers, the lower classes and most women would have had little or no prior experience with the timetable’s non-linear reading requirements (163). The changes in physical reading patterns which Esbester identifies are particularly telling: readers had to adapt to a “complex navigation: to move simultaneously along a row and down a column,” and to “search for individual details, ignoring irrelevant information rather than reading everything” (165). On a purely physical level, the timetable required new and non-intuitive movements.

Furthermore, the overall cheapness and poor design of many timetables made a timetable physically grueling even for the more experienced tabular readers. Jack Simmons notes that Bradshaw, in particular, was “produced in a small format, on poor paper, in minute—here and there in minuscule—type, with notes appended wherever they could be fitted into a page, often running sideways or even upside-down” (183).

Nowhere was the physical disconnection between timetables and humans more evident than in the discourse around railway accidents. The fact that railway accidents were sometimes caused by misread timetables points to the real stakes of a society’s adoption of a physically alienating information technology. 13 Despite the timetable’s

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13 Anxiety about train travel changed the law and the language. Railroad travelers began to demand compensation for non-physical injuries and neurological disorders, which would blossom in the mid-1860s into treatises such as John Eric Erichsen’s On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System (1866) and William Camps’s Railway Accidents or Collisions: Their Effects, Immediate and Remote, Upon the Brain
efforts to simplify and clarify the transit system (and, indeed, it is difficult to see what sort of practical alternative could exist), railway workers often found it physically difficult to fully comprehend the railway’s complex network of figures and locations. Writing about accidents on the line is often associated with the same language of physical exhaustion and frustration which characterized lighter accounts of reading Bradshaw’s. Matthew Wilson Smith notes the pressures on signal-men who had to use timetables to prevent accidents, citing an 1866 article in which the author invites us to consider:

…the case of a certain signal-man at one of our most frequented junctions, whose duties were so manifold and bewildering, and involved such intricate calculations of time and place—a half second wrong here, or a half inch wrong there being sure to bring about the most dreadful consequences—that the man at last fell into a morbid condition about his work… being strained and bewildered to a degree far beyond his powers of endurance… (Chesterfield 47)

The “half inch wrong” is a reference to reading timetables, which have a small spatial margin of error due to the quantity of information they contain. P. Chesterfield, Jr.’s description of the signal-man being “strained and bewildered” about his work is not dissimilar to the descriptions more casual users of the rail system give about Bradshaw’s. Here the problem has become life-threatening, eventually leading, by the end of the essay, to the signal-man’s death.

A slightly misread timetable, in short, could have deadly consequences. Toni Weller and David Bawden note that companies often shared lines but used different

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and Spinal Cord and Other Portions of the Nervous System (1866) (M. W. Smith 501). Furthermore, “disaster,” a word which had for centuries been used to apply to personal and social disorders or misfortunes, began to be applied to failures of systems, as it was frequently applied to the systemic problems in the rail system which caused accidents (504).
timetables, leading to many railway accidents, and adds that “local timetables were complicated affairs, crowding train departure times, maps of lines, and information on several geographical regions into one small booklet” (783–4). Probably the most famous example of a railway accident caused by a misread timetable was the 1865 Staplehurst train crash. This train crash, which killed ten people and injured forty-nine, is best known for nearly killing Charles Dickens, who famously re-entered the dangerous train, after assisting his fellow passengers, to rescue part of the manuscript of Our Mutual Friend. The crash was caused when a foreman misread his timetable and ordered workers to begin removing the track just before a train arrived (781). The image of a train disasters caused by misread timetables would also have been familiar to readers in 1862, as in, for example, the Clayton Tunnel disaster of 1861 (M. W. Smith 503).

Significantly, the timetable appears to become more physically grueling the more information it contains—in other words, the timetable creates a contentious relationship between human needs and information. The timetable is confusing because of the quantity of information it condenses, and the more information a timetable seeks to contain, the less clear relevance to humanity it retains. Timetables were satirized, used as metaphors for other complex tasks, and, as Alison Byerly notes, seen by Victorian users as “symptomatic of the information overload of the age” (172).

I conclude this section with a comparison of three different types of timetables, which showcase the inverse relationship between information and humanity and demonstrate why Lady Audley’s Secret draws on timetables to reinforce the idea of human disconnection. The following timetable (fig. 1), chosen rather because it fits the
paradigm than because it demands to be singled out, is a typical example of a Victorian
timetable. This is what contemporary readers would see when they opened up

*Bradshaw’s Railway Guide* in 1863:
Table 1. "Audley End" page from Bradshaw, Bradshaw, Bradshaw’s Monthly Railway and Steam Navigation Guide 73.
The format may look natural to us now—a list of ordered towns structure the rows, while different train times, neatly ordered by chronology, make up the columns. The table’s vertical lines straighten and simplify the journey of the train in a way which mirrors contemporary accounts of the physical straightness of the tracks. Time and space are isolated as the key indicators of meaning, promising readers the ability to locate a train at any given moment at a point or on the axis between two points. Viewed as an information discourse, the timetable effectively contains the greatest quantity of information in the smallest possible space, leading to a saturation of print on the physical page. The format seems to tell a story of order and usability.

Working against this surface of order, however, are hints that the timetable deals uneasily with inconsistency and human agency. At the bottom of the timetable we find additional, untabulated information, as in, for example, the words “Stop when required; passengers wishing to be set down must give notice to the Guard at the preceding stopping Station” (Bradshaw, Bradshaw’s Monthly 73). This suggests that the moment of the train’s greatest interaction with the human—the moment when a passenger can dictate a stop—is beyond the timetable’s representational capacity. We also see notes typed sideways in the columns which dictate irregularities, such as “Extra.—Norwich to Cambridge, on Saturdays, at 5 aft., calling at intermediate Stations” (73). Such exceptions literally do not fit into the timetable’s form.

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14 As Michael Freeman demonstrates in Railways and the Victorian Imagination (1999), the straight lines of the track would have struck Victorians, particularly in the early part of the era, as foreign and new; he notes that “in the eyes of someone living in the 1830s straight lines were relatively rare occurrences in transport undertakings and were still more unusual in nature. Their association with railroads goes as far back as the early 1820s...” (71).

15 For additional discussion of timetable readability, utilizing many of the texts I also reference here, see Mike Esbester, “Nineteenth-Century Timetables and the History of Reading” Book History 12 (2009): 156–185.
The emphasis on human agency, in fact, seems in timetables to exist in an inverse relation with the depth of information contained. Early timetables were less intimidating: the 1839 issue of *Bradshaw’s Railway Guide*, which is one of the earliest *Bradshaw’s* in existence, was thirteen pages long, including five pages of railway schedules and plans, along with another eight pages of supplemental material. By 1898, *Bradshaw’s* was 946 pages long (Richards and MacKenzie 96). Timetables with less emphasis on maximized information have more space to bring in humanity. The 1863 page from *Bradshaw’s* (fig. 1) has some significant differences from this 1839 edition (fig. 2): 

![Figure 2. Image from early Bradshaw. Bradshaw, Bradshaw’s Railway Timetables 1839](image-url)
This early timetable does share many features of the 1863 timetable (fig. 1), including tabular reading conventions and necessary extra information about human movements—in this case, charges for fares, instructions about ticket payment, and a no-smoking policy. But this guide makes more concessions to human needs. It is clearly more readable—the facts are more spread out on the page, there are no notes written in the columns, and this original guide was short enough to not need an index. Most significantly, this early timetable contains facts about the distance between stops in miles, long deleted by the 1860s version, which reinforces this timetable’s link to a concrete reality of human and machinic motion. As Bradshaw’s expanded, such human touches gave way to space considerations.

As Bradshaw’s grew, alternate forms of the timetable developed, which reduced some of the information contained but added in additional concessions to humanity. These alternative timetables showcase the disconnection inherent in the traditional timetable. One such alternative to Bradshaw is the ABC Railway Guide, a national timetable which allowed readers to look up their location alphabetically rather than by line. A sample from 1861 (fig. 3) follows:
Compared to *Bradshaw’s*, the ABC was much easier to equate to human movements. Readers looked up their station alphabetically to learn the trains between that station and
a central hub such as London. The ABC Guide is a representation of individual human journeys, rather than, like Bradshaw’s, a whole transit system. Its additional concessions to human movements made for an easier journey. The ABC gives no information about the movements of trains on the line as a whole, making it less useful if its reader wished to travel anywhere except into or out of the city, or wished to connect to a train on a different line. In essence, the ABC sacrifices the comprehensiveness of Bradshaw for a greater consideration of the human element.

These very different timetables demonstrate to us why Lady Audley’s Secret is skeptical of Robert Audley’s method of investigation, and why the use of timetables so consistently breaks down in the novel. The timetable symbolized the supposed autonomy of the timetable’s information, an autonomy which in society was often read as alienation from human bodies and needs. The timetable was thus a particularly effective symbol for increasing the sensational effects of the novel, as the following section explores.

Figurative Language and Madness

Lady Audley’s Secret references timetables in order to expose the autonomous and alienating properties of information. The timetable in the novel does more than express disconnection of people from each other or from real times and spaces, however. Braddon also uses timetables to evoke madness, hysteria, and other disconnections from the intellect.

Trains, timekeeping, and mechanical language repeatedly enter the novel as sensational, overwrought images. Train travel becomes symbolic of Robert’s melancholy
on the journey to Wildernsea, for the engine is “shrieking,” the journey “dreary,” and the landscape “lonely,” consisting of “desert wastes of flat meadow-land and bare cornfields” (241–2). Similarly, at the cottage where Luke Marks dies, the ticking of the “eight-day clock” becomes symbolic for Robert of melancholy and mortality, as the clock’s “heavy, monotonous ticking” seems to be “counting out the seconds which yet remained for the dying man, and checking them off with gloomy satisfaction. ‘Another minute gone! another minute gone! another minute gone!’” (Braddon 409). Additionally, when George Talboys hears of his wife’s supposed death, he hears a train. George “knew that there was a great noise as of half a dozen furious steam-engines tearing and grinding in his ears, and he knew nothing more…” (Braddon 37).

In one of the novel’s most striking pieces of imagery, the narrator represents existential despair in language associated with the timetable, images which again cast doubt on the efficacy on an investigation shaped around timetables. The timetable’s regularity and a clock’s machinery become sensational images in the text. As the narrator states: “We are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life—this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be for ever broken, and the hands...

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16 Robert here struggles to look outward and see the landscape, but instead can only see it as a reflection of his mind:

The knowledge of the purpose of his journey blighted every object upon which his absent glances fixed themselves for a moment; only to wander wearily away; only to turn inwards upon that far darker picture always presenting itself to his anxious mind (Braddon 241).

As the train becomes symbolic of Robert’s melancholy, the setting itself becomes pathological and physically exhausting. Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests that the railway’s conditions “‘mechanized’ the traveler’s perceptions” as the qualities observed by a traveler became reduced to blurred impressions of sizes, shapes, and motion. “Smells and sounds, not to mention the synesthetic perceptions that were part of travel in Goethe’s time simply disappeared,” states Schivelbusch (55). The railway opened up space in that it allowed for more ease of travel, but “it did so by destroying space, namely the space between points” (37). The perceptual shift common in all train travel here becomes an exhausting expanse. The passage thus uses the real experience of rail travel to enhance the novel’s sensational aspects.
pointing to purposeless figures upon a shattered dial” (205) The “smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine” are joined here with the image of a clock or watch spinning constantly without meaning, the figures made “purposeless” by their very regularity. Time, made by the timetable into the most regular and rigid of all of the listed “apparatus of existence,” leads into this strangely figurative and self-reflective moment of narratorial intrusion. For a novel which makes its meaning so much around time, these images of shattered and meaningless timekeeping are a lingering reminder that the timetable is alienated from more human forms of meaning-making.

More significantly, Lady Audley’s madness is explicitly connected to time. Knowing she is cornered, she tries to convince her husband Sir Michael that his nephew, Robert Audley, is mad and has developed a monomania around the disappearance of George Talboys. Her description of madness, which seems to be a description of her own mental state, links madness with the language of movement and time. Madness, she explains, is “stagnation” of thought and interruption in “the even current of the mind” (Braddon 287). Not accidentally, Lady Audley herself exhibits just these traits when she is waiting for news of Robert’s supposed death to reach the house. In this scene, time itself twists into madness:
She wished that the earth might stand still, and the paralysed elements cease from their natural functions; that the progress of time might stop, that the Day of Judgment might come, and that she might thus be brought before an unearthly tribunal, and so escape the intervening shame and misery of any earthly judgment…

And now her mind underwent a complete change. She no longer wished to delay that dreaded intelligence. She wished the agony, whatever it was to be, over and done with, the pain suffered, and the release attained. It seemed to her as if the intolerable day would never come to an end, as if her mad wishes had been granted, and the progress of time had actually stopped. (339)

Lady Audley is unusually proficient with timetables. As Louise Lee suggests, Lady Audley is never shown “…poring over train timetables, missing trains, or even (heaven forbid) waiting for late ones” (135). But here we see that rather than controlling time, it controls her. At this key moment, the narrative shifts into free indirect discourse, showing how irregular and subjective is the human experience of time in contrast to the orderly spaces of the timetable. Lady Audley does have a moment of control, almost believing in her ability to stop and control time. Simultaneously, however, her vision of time exhausts her. She longs to give up control, wishing for an apocalyptic Judgment Day which would allow her to surrender her agency and avoid the exhaustion of time altogether. Even a master of the timetable network cannot really control it.

Timetables, that supposedly orderly symbol of information, were in fact quite often associated in the Victorian press in language with madness, or, at the very least, with figurative language. The examples below expose how conscious Victorians were of the autonomous nature of the timetable’s information, and their concern about the broader alienations this autonomy could create.
Victorian authors often slip into figurative language when speaking of timetables, suggesting that the autonomous, abstract nature of the timetable’s information makes it difficult to describe in concrete language. Such examples therefore point to the dangers perceived in the timetable’s supposedly autonomous information. One 1887 journalist compares timetables from 1837 and 1887, noting:

One only need compare this earliest of railway guides with that mysterious and awful compilation familiarly known as Bradshaw in order to estimate at a glance the wonderful progress that has been made in the Victorian era. The Bradshaw of modern years, from its wonderful and mystifying enumeration of express, Parliamentary, and all sorts of trains, has been and still continues to be the subject of more strong language than any other compilation under the sun. To the initiated it is no doubt an exceedingly simple and clever piece of cataloguing; but to the anxious traveller who is in a hurry to catch a train, and has no other time table at hand—who takes up a Bradshaw for the first time in his life—it is simply Greek. It is far more mysterious to an unenlightened peruser than the complicated machinery which works the railway engine. ("The First Railway Timetable" 4)

A few details here are particularly telling. The timetable was seen as an important and almost unique indicator of Victorian modernity due to the impressive quantity of practical information about train travel which it was perceived to contain. Yet the critic is almost entirely unable to speak of this compendium of “rational” information in rational language. Instead, Bradshaw, this “simple and clever piece of cataloging,” is almost entirely devoid of meaning in this description. The critic describes it as “mysterious,” “mystifying,” and “wonderful,” a text in “Greek” that can only be understood by the “initiated.” Rather than being a simple vehicle for understanding complex machinic movements, the timetable itself needs to be understood as a new language, a “machinery” in its own right. The timetable, designed to help readers interpret a complex transit
system, here itself becomes the object in need of interpretation. This is significant, because such skeptical and figurative language exposes consciousness of the figurative nature of the timetable, which only offers a flattened, abstract version of a train’s movements.

The rise of timetables spawned another genre, guides to the Guide, a market which reflects skepticism of whether the timetable is alone sufficient for human needs. These guides offered the traveler advice, local descriptions, and other information. Their format varied, but many gave advice on how to read timetables, often again using figurative language. One example of such a guide was The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book from 1862. This guide opens by introducing its readers to both tabular and alphabetical guides. The ABC Railway Guide is described by The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book as “a work easy of reference” but one that is “chiefly adapted for the use of persons who have only to proceed direct from one point to another, without being doomed to thread the labyrinth of branch lines, junctions, etc.” (The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book 10). It is significant that while the human-centric ABC can be explained in everyday terms as “easy of reference,” the description immediately becomes figurative when it reaches the more abstract tables of Bradshaw, which are described with the language of “doom” and “thread[ing] the labyrinth.” Again, writers on the timetable find the abstract timetable taking on a life of its own, separate from and often hostile to its human uses.

The guide continues in a similar vein:
And we must confess, that although we are acquainted with a few of the initiated to whom Bradshaw is as easy as A B C, we have never yet met with a lady who did not regard it as a literary puzzle, while the majority of the sterner sex have failed to master its intricacies. Knowing by experience the great value of this *vade mecum*, and desirous that others may equally appreciate it, we will endeavour to furnish a key to some of the most prominent difficulties, in a few brief suggestions which may be collectively terms “How to read Bradshaw.” *(The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book)*

Again, we see the urge to the figurative when the timetable is described. We also find consciousness of *Bradshaw’s* as a puzzle, a symbolic system requiring work for interpretation, rather than presenting a clear explanation for human needs. The *Guide* is presented as intricate and inaccessible, with sensational associations reinforced by the Latin *vade mecum*, used instead of “guide” or “tome.”

Elsewhere, the *Handy Book* expresses skepticism of the alienating nature of the timetable’s information. The guide suggests that *Bradshaw’s* “contains a mass of information compressed into the very smallest compass, but on that account… it is not so easy of interpretation as it might be” *(The Railway Traveller’s Handy Book)*.

*Bradshaw’s* reliance on a system of “various signs and symbols” also needs additional explanation (11). The *Handy Book* lists nine different suggestions for understanding *Bradshaw’s* symbols, including some which seem to only re-emphasize the complexity of the text it tries to clarify, as in, for example, “4. When a train stops at some given point without proceeding further, it is notified by a thick black line ─, or by the word ‘Stop.’ If any train be shown below in the same column, it is an independent one” (11). While there is no hyperbole here as we see in so many discussions of the timetable, the

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17 The gendered ability to make meaning mirrors the real social divide between male and female familiarity with other sorts of tabular discourse, since, as I earlier stated, men were far more likely to have prior experience with tabular reading patterns than women were.
explanations prove almost as complex as Bradshaw’s itself. Bradshaw’s is full of signs, symbols, and times lacking an intuitive connection to human usefulness.\footnote{While my focus here matches the Victorian focus on Bradshaw’s, Victorian railway timetables did take different formats. Beyond the national guides such as Bradshaw’s and The ABC Railway Guide, which collected information from all the discrete railway companies, less comprehensive information could be found in guides issued by individual railway companies such as the Great Western Railway. Such guides usually cost a penny and often had “handsome eye-catching covers,” though these guides were limited in not containing the same breadth of information as the national guides (Richards and MacKenzie 97). Local timetables, which usually only included information about the direct routes from the station, could also be found at stations and were published in local newspapers.}

The most extreme fictional cases show characters trying to use timetables, only to lose all connection to any sort of human reality. This trope shows the perceived power of timetables, which are far more likely in many fictions to trap the user into the table than to easily yield their information. The specific ways in which the two texts which follow describe timetables demonstrate that it is the autonomous nature of the timetable’s information that made it such a powerful symbol for Lady Audley’s madness and for Robert’s melancholy.

Comic stories expose the timetable’s disconnection from the real by linking stories of reading timetables with mental disassociations from reality. In the 1856 Punch comic play “Bradshaw, a Mystery,” Orlando wishes to plan a route to Liverpool on Britain’s extensive rail system so that he can visit his love, Leonora. But these plans lead to disaster when the couple tries to use Bradshaw’s Railway Guide, as we see in figures 4 and 5:
In the above images, Leonora hides her face in her hands, desperately attempting to shut out the excess of information that resides in the timetable, while Orlando, the more extreme example, loses consciousness entirely and collapses in his servant’s arms. His overwhelmed eyes, ears, and indeed, his whole face retreat under the wild blankness of his hair, and the piles of papers represented in the background become symbolic of the vast scale of the task which he has undertaken to perform. The railway timetables are so confusing that both characters nearly go mad. Paradoxically, the disorder of the mind demonstrated by characters such as Leonora and Orlando grows out of the order of the timetable, seemingly the most rational of forms.

Orlando looks to the guide to determine a route to his love, essentially opening the text in the hopes of finding Leonora inside. He is quickly confused, however, by the
contrast between the human Leonora and the seemingly autonomous information

presented in the timetable, saying: “Yes, that’s the line that leads to Leonora, / I mean to
Liverpool” (“Bradshaw. A Mystery.” 203). Soon, Bradshaw’s information in the abstract
leads to the disappearance of the real:

Why, what is this? I’ll to the Index turn,
And see if that can help me. Ha, ha, ha!
There’s no such place as Liverpool set down.
It don’t exist! Liverpool is a myth.
Its Commerce, Shipping, Public buildings, Docks,
Are all a dream—There is no Liverpool! (203)

Here, the physical concreteness of Liverpool, from its buildings to its business, vanishes.
And instead of the timetable being incorrect, it is Liverpool which loses its connection to
reality, despite Orlando’s desperate invocation of its concrete buildings and docks. The
absurdity of this moment, associated with Orlando’s descent into madness, ultimately
points to how all timetables fictionalize their relationship to real time and space.

The particular brand of madness which arises when fictional characters confront
the timetable is an inability to form a connection between the abstract information on a
timetable and the human realities it seeks to embody. Accordingly, by the end of
“Bradshaw. A Mystery,” Bradshaw has ceased to refer to the real at all, and instead
becomes a fantasy realm where concretes cannot exist:
He talks of trains arriving that ne’er start;
Of trains that seem to start, and ne’er arrive;
Of junctions where no union is effected;
Of coaches meeting trains that never come;
Of trains to catch a coach that never goes;
Of trains that start after they have arrived;
Of trains arriving long before they leave?
He bids us “see” some page that can’t be found;
Or if ’tis found, it speaks of spots remote
From those we seek to reach! (“Bradshaw. A Mystery.” 203)

The dualities built into these lines represent the total breakdown of meaning—not only do trains never start, but even if they do, they never arrive. The core facts which Bradshaw contains—times of arrival and departure, tips on junctions and coaches, help finding information on other pages—here become sensational, because they are disconnected from humanity.

This skepticism about the relationship between autonomous information and human movement emerges even more openly in Charles Dickens’s short story, “A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering.” Published in Household Words in 1851, the story traces the history of Mr. Lost trying to take a journey. His adventure begins when Mr. Lost sends his servant to purchase a Railway Guide:

This document was the first shock in connexion with his extraordinary journey which Mr. Lost and family received. For, on referring to the Index, to ascertain how Ware stood in reference to the Railways of the United Kingdom and the Principality of Wales, they encountered the following mysterious characters:—
WARE TU ...... 6

No farther information could be obtained. They thought of page six, but there was no such page in the book, which had the sportive eccentricity of beginning at page eight. (Dickens, “A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering” 361)
Michael Slater has suggested that Dickens here refers to the 1851 May issue of Bradshaw, which has a misprint saying that Ware is on page 6, rather than 36. The “Tu” refers to the Tuesday market-day in Ware, which is “quite clearly explained in the notes” of the original Bradshaw’s (M. Slater). The fact that this printed text, “WARE TU” can for Dickens serve both as a reality indicator and as a pun on “where to?” is rather extraordinary, and points to the unstable nature of the information contained in the timetable, since even a literal signifier of the real cannot lead us to meaning, but only to additional confusion.

As Mr. Lost’s journey proceeds, it gradually becomes clear that Mr. Lost is traveling not through England, but through Bradshaw itself. Unable to use the timetable as a tool, Mr. Lost instead gets trapped in it. Mr. Lost attempts to return home from London by the train at “eleven o’clock in the forenoon,” but finds “a powerful black bar drawn across the road, hopelessly impeding his progress!” (Dickens, “A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering” 362). The “drawn” black bar is an allusion to the black line drawn across a railway schedule when a train ends its journey on that line, demonstrating that Mr. Lost has begun to enter the world of the timetable. Mr. Lost returns to London and attempts again at “five minutes past five in the afternoon” but is once more stopped by the black bar, and again returns, increasingly haggard. He leaves London again, “this time at half an-hour after twelve at noon” (362). The specific times of the railways proliferate in the text, emphasizing the overwhelming excess of printed times on the pages of Bradshaw’s Guide. After fighting off various “hostile towns,” Mr. Lost seems about to reach Gloucester, his destination, but: “It was his horrible fate to depart from
Cirencester exactly an hour before he arrived there, and to leave Gloucester ten minutes before he got to it!” (362).

From the staid beginnings of the story, the experience of Bradshaw becomes nightmarish and irrational, signaled by the increasingly random indicators of space. Mr. Lost travels through a disordered list of towns in England, Scotland, Wales, and even France, and then, abandoning all hope of the railways, he begins to “institute a feverish inquiry for it [his hometown] among a host of boarding-houses and hotels” (Dickens, “A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering” 363). At this point, Mr. Lost has passed through the timetable section of Bradshaw into its back matter, which often included lists of local places to stay. From there, Mr. Lost loses all sense of reality, first addressing a bookmaker for help, and “after them, even to inanimate things” such as the “Patent Compendium Portmanteau, the improved Chaff Machines and Corn Crushers, the Norman Razor, the Bank of England Sealing Wax, Schweppe’s Soda Water…” (“A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering” 363). He begins his travels through the train schedules, but ends them in the advertisements.

Mr. Lost’s inability to understand the difference between objects and people mirrors the larger disconnection between the human reality of the train and the autonomous information in the timetable. In this story, the timetable’s information has no relation to the train whatsoever, but has become completely autonomous, referring only to itself. Accordingly, attempting to plan a route with it leads, not to the timetable revealing real information, but to the human becoming abstracted. Mr. Lost gets trapped in Bradshaw because Bradshaw has no connection to the England he wishes to traverse.
The story ends with Mr. Lost incoherently repeating the word “Bradshaw” in response to his wife’s questions, turning over the pages of his guide hopelessly, having lost his connection with humanity in his journey through the realm of autonomous information.

Disciplinary Timetables

*Lady Audley’s Secret* repeatedly notes the disconnection between a timetable’s structures and human meaning. With this in mind, we can see just how skeptical the novel is of situations in which characters are disciplined by timetables. Both Robert Audley and Lady Audley are transformed by timetables over the course of the novel, and the novel at least professedly seems to celebrate these transformations. But a closer examination shows that these character endings lack connection with the rest of the narrative. The timetable ultimately cannot lead to a real ending, since a timetable cannot encompass human meaning.

Over the course of the novel, the characters are socialized to a more precise timekeeping framework. The novel opens in a world free of timetables, beginning with a “stupid, bewildering clock,” which has only an hour hand, and thus “jumped straight from one hour to the next” (Braddon 1). Robert Audley, at the opening of the novel, has lived as a barrister for five years without even trying to get a brief. Instead, he reads novels and occasionally lies in a shady spot in the Temple Gardens. The fact that his time is measured in years, rather than in minutes, associates him with the novel’s opening clock image. Robert Audley, operating outside of time, is “a man who would never get on
in the world,” with a “listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner” which puts him distinctly out of sync with modernity (Braddon 32).

Robert’s increased socialization to standardized time forms one of the central threads of the novel. In order to capture Lady Audley and discover the truth about his missing friend George Talboys, Robert must learn to negotiate the timetable and adapt himself to the smaller units of time needed for modern life. He rapidly travels to and from Audley, London, Southampton, and Liverpool, undertaking a dizzying route across Britain in search of the information he needs. By the end of the novel, this process transforms Robert from what one critic has called “a ne’er-do-well aristocrat with no ambitions or respect for societal expectations” into “a model citizen and embodiment of the social institutions he had heretofore rejected” (Pallo 466). The careless, time-wasting Robert Audley of the novel’s first chapters is transformed into a productive modern member of society by his adaptation to modernity’s disciplines. He allows himself to be forced into rapid motion and physical activity, and he learns to follow time-based schedules. He wins his wife Clara partially by implying that she has the power to give “a solemn purpose to every hour of his existence,” or, in other words, to fix his movements along a timetable (Braddon 436). It is not accidental that the prerequisite of winning Harcourt Talboys’s consent to his marriage with Clara seems to be that he never “oversleep the signal of the clanging bell,” or fail to adapt himself to Mr. Talboys’s strict time regime (438).

Robert Audley’s ending is professedly a happy one—the dangerous bigamist woman locked in a madhouse, Robert Audley marries Clara and settles into productive
middle-class life in a suburban cottage. The supposedly murdered George Talboys even reappears in the novel’s final pages. Yet the ending, as many scholars have complained, is distinctly unsatisfying. Robert’s idyllic country cottage seems disconnected from the rest of the novel. The “neo-pastoralist impulse,” as Nicholas Daly calls it, feels contrived, an incomplete retreat from the sensation novel’s emphasis on modernity (37). Simon Petch, similarly, argues that the pastoral end space of the novel “turns out to be a limbo in which [Robert’s] identity is stalled,” causing the novel to “peter… out in a carnival of patriarchal penultimacy in which everyone is in transit” (1, 10). George’s being “in between” wives, Robert’s suspension between suburban trade and the country estate, and the ambiguous status of Audley Court itself, which is shown to visitors but without Sir Michael’s knowledge, all in Petch’s view point to a lack of closure. Furthermore, the ending opens questions of Robert and George’s homoeroticism which are now often read as a threat to Robert and Clara’s marriage bond, as Andrew King notes (60). Even the narrator herself seems anxious about the ending, inserting herself into the narrative to fend off future criticism: “I hope that no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace” (Braddon 446–7).

How can this be? Robert sets out to solve a mystery by creating a timetable, and his strategy succeeds—why does the ending seem so disjointed from the rest of the novel? The problem is the timetable itself. The supposedly autonomous nature of its information, which seems to exist independently of human needs, bears the threatening possibility that it may actually be able to control humans. Robert has not really succeeded
in mastering the timetable by the end—instead, the timetable has mastered him, trapping him, like Mr. Lost, in a world that lacks connection with the novel’s broader reality.

The context of Robert’s transformation is a Britain which increasingly was being forced by the railways to adapt itself to standardized time. Had he lived a century earlier, Robert Audley might never have thought of the time “12:40,” and he certainly would not have been able to plan the elaborate route to Villebrumeuse which opened this chapter with any precision. Before the railways, time existed on a town-by-town basis, planned around the church clock. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, it made no difference that London was four minutes ahead of Reading, seven and a half minutes ahead of Cirencester, and fourteen minutes ahead of Bridgwater (43). Time would not become fully standardized across Britain until 1880 (44). Early timetables struggled to negotiate the new need for standardized time with local skepticism of so-called “railway time.” One 1887 critic looks back with nostalgia at an 1837 railway guide’s statement that a train will arrive in Newcastle at “about half-past five o’clock.” Such a vague arrival time, the critic notes, would “hardly suit the energetic commercial of our day, who thinks himself aggrieved if the train is two minutes behind time, and claims damages if the delay amounts to anything like a quarter of an hour” (“The First Railway Timetable” 4). As the timetable necessitated specific, standardized times in day-to-day life, the timetable was in turn forged into increasing specificity and complexity by the growing railway.

If Britain as a whole was changing times, timetables were also demonstrating their ability to control humanity across a wide range of activities. As Simmons argues, “the railway forged an instrument widely adaptable to the closer regulation of society at
large” in the railway timetable, which was soon adapted to other disciplinary functions (184). In the 1850s the word “timetable” began to spread from the railways to other discourses, and was used to refer to “a plan of times at which events are scheduled to take place;” in other words, any type of schedule. 1858 also saw timetables interacting with business, as workers’ schedules began to be controlled by a “table recording the number of hours worked by employees”—the first time sheets. Also at the middle of the century, the word begins to appear in regards to schools. Student time began to be controlled by tabular charts, with a definition first appearing in 1845 of the timetable as “a chart showing how the time of a school or college is allotted to the various classes and subjects” (“Timetable, N.”). Timetables were at times even taught in Victorian schools. At George Edmondson’s progressive Queenwood Hall school, which was under his management from 1846 to 1863, Edmondson “had several editions of Henry Bradshaw’s Railway Time Tables among his school books, in which the boys were examined in finding routes” (Holyoake).¹⁹

For the Victorian reader, in other words, timetables were associated with discipline, in a precursor of the Foucauldian sense. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault writes of disciplinary functions of the tabular form:

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¹⁹ Interestingly, this real example takes place simultaneously with a comic 1850 *Punch* article demonstrating that the connections Foucault sees between disciplinary places and the disciplinary structure of the timetable were not lost on the Victorians. In the comic article, the narrator proposes teaching *Bradshaw’s* in school, saying that for anyone “anxious to train up a child,” “nothing would be a severer lesson than to carry the infant mind through a regular course of railway trains as indicated in the published Time-tables” (“An Educational Novelty” 167). The article further proposes that “one of the large monthly sheets of *Bradshaw* should be put up in every school-room,” and that the boys be “divided into three classes, in accordance with railway division” (167). Of course, this does mirror George Edmondson’s actual curriculum, but interestingly, it shows skepticism of the process by which the timetable seems to take agency over human movements.
In organizing ‘cells’, ‘places’ and ‘ranks’, the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical. It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational links; they mark places and indicate values; they guarantee the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture… The first of the great operations of discipline is… the constitution of ‘tableaux vivants’, which transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities. (148)

For Foucault, the physical table and the human table are fluid concepts. He traces this specifically in the elementary school, where organizing the students in rows and columns based on criteria such as the student’s progress and character made the educational space function as “a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding” (147). By the eighteenth century, as Foucault argues, tables had appeared in various fields, including botany, economics, the military, and medicine. The table fills different functions in different fields, but all in all, “the table was both a technique of power and a procedure of knowledge… it was a question of organizing the multiple, of providing oneself with an instrument to cover it and master it; it was a question of imposing upon it an ‘order’” (148). The underlying structures of the timetable, therefore, signify disciplinary order and control.

Robert Audley’s socialization to specific times is therefore not an unambiguously positive one. But the disconnection of Robert’s ending pales beside the far more serious issues raised by Lady Audley’s fate. Robert Audley, at the conclusion of the novel, gets a

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20 The classroom itself can be read in this situation as a table. Students progressed from one to another part of the table by means of exercises of increasing difficulty, a “seriation” of successive activities” which “makes possible a whole investment of duration by power: the possibility of a detailed control and a regular intervention… in each moment of time…” (Foucault 160). In other words, disciplinary time detached training time from “the time of mastery” by “arranging different stages, separated from one another by graded examinations…” (159).
doctor to declare Lady Audley mad and imprisons her in a madhouse abroad, where she later dies. This detention has been the subject of much speculation by critics. The ending is haunted by troubling facts about her imprisonment—that her “murdered” victim reappears, that she is given no trial, and that, as she says, “law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house” (Braddon 394). Lady Audley dies in the madhouse, without trial, and without receiving any convincing answer to the questions she has explicitly raised about marriage obligations, poverty, and gender.

The ending is further undermined by the prominent role which timetables play in her capture. In view of the awareness the novel shows of the disconnect between human movements and tabular time, it serves as a further warning sign that the diagnosis of her madness is made in short, parcelled times, controlled by the train. At 10:55 Dr. Alwy Mosgrave arrives to diagnose her in language charged with timetable references: “The first fast train from London arrived at Audley at half-past ten o’clock, and at five minutes before eleven, Richards… announced Dr. Alwy Mosgrave” (374). He discusses the case with Robert, and says he will see her, but “I can only spare you twenty minutes,” and in fact, it is not even that long before he returns and gives his diagnosis: “Ten minutes afterwards he returned” (379). The novel emphasizes, in other words, the hurried, time-controlled nature of his diagnosis. His prescription, requiring him to write a letter about her condition to be given to the madhouse doctors, takes even less time. He says “I have

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21 Elizabeth Langland, for example, is one of many critics to preface her analysis with the idea that “although Braddon ostensibly produces the conventional conclusion of evil punished at the end of her story, the representation of Lady Audley complicates a traditional reading of that conclusion” (4). Lady Audley’s confinement, furthermore, is often read as a commentary on gender. D.A. Miller, for example, argues that the ending shows merely that Lady Audley must not “be supposed capable of acting on her own diabolical responsibility and hence of publicly spoiling her assigned role as the conduit of power transactions between men” (171).
only five minutes more,” and he writes his letter “rapidly for about seven minutes” (380). As he leaves, he says, “My time was up ten minutes ago; it is as much as I shall do to catch the train” (381). Like her capture, Lady Audley’s final imprisonment is created by a timetable, and yet this structure fails to give the entire story. Significantly, the doctor’s brief visit does not elicit any confession, and it is only later that the full extent of her history and crimes are revealed in narrative form. The form of the novel disconnects subtly from its content—the times may be correct, but they fail to tell the whole story of Lady Audley’s human movements.

Reading the novel alongside the timetable reveals the skepticism of the sensation novel about whether relying on the timetable’s structures can really bring us meaning. If the bucolic ending and the madhouse both seem disconnected from the full story of the novel, it is only because the autonomous information in the timetable cannot possibly lead to full human understanding. The timetable is not ultimately connected to the people using the train, and the timetables which structure Lady Audley and Robert Audley’s lives are not necessarily connected to the complexities of human meaning. Since in modern detective fiction forming a chronology almost always leads to meaning-making, this is an easy thing to take for granted.

The Sensation Novel and the Timetable

Victorian information in detective fiction always appears sensationalized, and in the case of the timetable, overtly linked to the form’s sensational effects. Nicholas Daly calls the sensation novel a “punctual form, depending on accurate time-keeping and
scrupulous attention to the calendar… the first subgenre in which a Bradshaw’s railway schedule and a watch become necessary to the principal characters” (47). Daly’s argument forged a strong critical link between the sensation novel and the train, which reappears in more recent work such as Matthew Wilson Smith’s “Victorian Railway Accident and the Melodramatic Imagination” (2012) and Lee Louise’s “Lady Audley’s Secret: How Does She Do It? Sensation Fiction’s Technologically Minded Villainesses” (2011) (33).

If Robert Audley and Lady Audley are buffeted and disciplined by time, then the narrative also gets caught in this increasingly precise motion, further reinforcing the sensational nature of the text’s fictional information. Time initially travels slowly and gradually in the novel, but moments where the plot moves forward are associated with a proliferation of shorter and more specific time periods in the text. We might call these periods, which give details about specific times, hours, and even minutes on particular days “expansions” of time in the novel, in opposition to contracted time which considers the longer spans of months, years, and seasons. Almost as soon as Robert meets George Talboys, the event which begins his chronological task, precise times begin to appear in the text around Robert and time begins to expand into more details. George’s banking takes “a quarter of an hour,” a waiter returns without a letter in “three minutes,” and George sits without speaking for “half an hour” (Braddon 35, 36, 40). Time then temporarily contracts again, showing us the wider spread of months and years, and resuming its shorter and more specific chronology only when the plot moves forward again.
There are in fact four main periods when the novel’s time expands. The first expansion of time begins with George’s return in late August of 1857, which triggers the specific times of the trip to Liverpool, visiting the bank, waiting at the coffeehouse, and the train trip to Ventnor to visit Captain Maldon. Time contracts again when the men decide to live together, and then go to Saint Petersburg for a whole year. The second expansion of time begins when Robert writes to Alicia about visiting Audley court on August 30, 1858, and receives her refusal. This triggers the specifics of their trip, the events of the day, and Robert’s investigation of George’s disappearance. Time meanders once again after the holidays, but specific times are again triggered a few months later on January 26, 1859, when Robert is kicked out of Audley Court and moves to the Castle Inn, leading to the race to Helen’s letters between Robert and Lady Audley, Robert’s trip to Grange Heath, and his meeting with Clara. The investigation stalls again but picks up only a month later, as the news that Sir Michael is ill on February 24, 1859 leads Robert’s return to Audley Court, his visit to Mrs. Vincent, his discussion with Lady Audley, and her imprisonment in the madhouse, all of which take place during a few carefully-delineated days. The novel closes with a brief period of contracted time, touching only on a monthly basis on Robert’s wooing, Lady Audley’s death, and George’s return.

As the novel progresses, in other words, we enter longer and longer periods of expanded, specific time. Meanwhile, the spans of contracted time cover less ground, shifting from the representation of a year, to a few months, to a single month between the periods of expansion. The expanded sections, when time is covered in great detail, begin to take up increasingly more and more of the novel, while the contracted sections cover
less and less story time. In other words, the narrative of the novel is itself undergoing a process of socialization from the broad shifts of “the stupid clock” to the specifics of hours and minutes. The narrative shift mirrors and implicates its implied readers in Robert’s socialization. Significantly, each of these periods of expanded time are triggered by rail travel—George’s return, Robert and George’s trip to Audley Court, Robert’s trip to Mount Stanning, and Robert’s trip from London to investigate Sir Michael’s illness—further emphasizing the connection to “railway time.”

When we finish the novel, we have also been buffeted by the timetable. The timetable, which in the novel both seems to be able to exist autonomous of human connection and to actively act on and control humanity, is a particularly apt and effective device for the sensation novel. Just as the characters become caught up in a time-centric world, the novel imagines its implied readers caught up helplessly in a disciplinary time system.

Conclusion

*Lady Audley’s Secret* is a novel in which the content stands in opposition to the form. The characters believe in timetables, and the plot develops from Robert Audley trying to use the abstract conventions of the timetable to reach human understanding of what caused George’s disappearance. Despite the emphasis of the characters on what we might term the “epistemology of the timetable,” the formal qualities of the novel constantly undercut the link between the timetable and the real. Timetables are revealed
as a distorted mirror of the novel’s reality, inconsistent and constantly shifting, and the novel ultimately demonstrates skepticism of the Victorian era’s new abstract information.

In using timetables to signal not correlation but disconnection between information and human use, *Lady Audley’s Secret* makes what may now seem to be a subtle critique of the idea of the timetable. The timetable spoof stories and railway guides, however, suggest that such a disconnection was in fact a common part of the timetable discourse in the Victorian era. It is only the timetable itself which makes a claim that its representation is an uncomplicated one.

How is it so easy to miss the sensational nature of the railway timetable? Perhaps because we have already been socialized to understanding the information technology by reading the sensation novel. Daly connects this “new time consciousness” of Victorian society with the pace and physicality of the sensation novel, which “synchronizes its readers with industrial modernity” by “acclimatiz[ing] its readers to railway time and space” (46, 37). By the end of the century, in contrast to the 1860s, readers had been “retrained to accommodate the shocks of mechanical modernity” (33). In other words, passengers learned to adjust to a host of new physical sensations on the train by reading the sensation novel, a genre which moves quickly, starts and stops rapidly, and carries the reader inexorably towards the final destination.

Such is, perhaps, the final irony of the use of train times in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. If we overlook the sensational nature of timetables today, it is because sensation novels such as this one helped us acclimatize to a society in which standardized and specific times have lost their sensational valences. The physical anxieties created by the sensation
novel’s use of timetables can actually be seen as creating a readership capable of unconsciously absorbing the shocks of that modernity, and thus of reading the novel without experiencing anxiety from the timetables.

If the textual timetable now seems orderly, it might be because we have been thoroughly “acclimatized” to a modernity which includes trains and timetables. Today, when the Victorian timetable does resurface in the discourse, it tends to evoke nostalgia rather than nervousness. In 2012, a reprint of the Victorian Bradshaw’s Handbook briefly shot onto the bestseller list for Amazon UK. This popularity was fueled by a BBC Two TV series called Great British Railway Journeys in which Michael Portillo, a former MP, used an original Bradshaw to “travel the length and breadth of the rail network, [and] to see the impact of the railways and how the country has changed since the Victorian era, when the book was first produced” (“Victorian Railway Guide is Best-Seller” 9). The picturesque reprints of the guidebook, sitting on bookshelves all around Britain, make a certain amount of sense, of course—they stand now, as they always did, as a symbol of a fantasy of national order and rationality. One wonders if the fans who bought the reprinted Bradshaw’s are able to interpret its details, or whether the guide has become a pure souvenir of the past, something to own rather than something to read. It is only in guidebooks, stories and novels of people using the timetable that we discover, underneath the orderly rows and columns, an irrational wildness.
CHAPTER 3

EMBODIED ELECTRICS: MATERIALITY AND PRESENCE IN TELEGRAMS AND

TELEGRAPH SECRETS

Introduction

In “A Murderer at Large,” one of nine stories in Bracebridge Hemyng’s 1867 short-story collection *Telegraph Secrets*, a woman in France sends a very private telegram to her lover Vellac in England. Vellac, over the course of several months, has murdered the entire family of his business partner in order to gain full control of his wealth. After the final murder, the police begin to suspect Vellac, and he gathers his wealth and hides in a hotel, telegraphing his lover Amélie to join him. Amélie replies to his telegram, writing: “Dear Auguste, I have received your second message, and will at once come to you at the hotel you mention in Richmond. I am sorry affairs have taken so bad a turn” (Hemyng 93). It seems at this point that they will meet and successfully get away with the crime.

Amélie and Vellac have, however, made a fatal miscalculation. When they telegraph information to each other about Vellac’s hiding place in Richmond, they see only the telegraph’s ability to communicate messages much faster than they could be delivered by hand in a letter. What they miss when they exchange this information by telegraph are the many material aspects of the process which stand between the sender and receiver—the physical machines, the pieces of paper on which their messages are transcribed, and the human bodies of the operators.
All of these physical aspects of telegraphy lead to Vellac’s capture. Amélie’s telegram is relayed from Paris to Richmond through an intermediary telegraph office (probably in London), where, coincidentally, a police detective is at that very moment consulting with a telegraph operator about finding Vellac. The telegraph operator is the short story collection’s narrator, Mr. Mortimer, who goes to a machine, and learns that a message has just been sent from Amélie to Vellac. He reads the physical copy of the telegram which the operator has copied down, and tells the detective where Vellac can be found. They go to the hotel in Richmond and find Vellac, who commits suicide. Vellac’s location is here revealed by various material aspects of the telegraph: the physical paper which bears a record of the message, the physical structure of a communication network requiring messages to be sent through additional wires and stations, and, above all, the physical presence of the operators. At the conclusion of the story, the detective concludes that “We have to thank the Telegraph for helping us to rid society of a ruffian” (94).

Telegraph Secrets critiques the idea of “disembodiment,” one imagined property of abstract information. In the Victorian era, content was imagined to exist apart from context in the broad sense of social, cultural, and material references. “Disembodiment” is used in this chapter specifically to refer to information’s perceived ability to exist free of any material context or form. Compared to earlier perceptions of information as stored in books and similar forms, the telegraph allowed contemporary thinkers to conceive of information as a pure essence. James Carey notes that the telegraph “permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation,” allowing messages to be imagined “separated from the physical movement of objects” (157). He
relates the telegraph to mind-body dualism, and suggests that the telegraph “located vital energy in the realm of the mind, in the nonmaterial world” (159). Victorians often celebrated the imagined disembodiment of the telegraph, showing that they were greatly invested in this perception of the information age.

It was therefore a source of discord in the discussion around telegraphs that this “disembodied” form relied on many physical bodies—operators, machines, and pieces of paper. As Richard Menke puts it, the telegraph’s apparent power to “decouple the content of the message from any material instantiation, and the text from inscription by any body” gradually gave way to a disappointed sense that “this apparent power was based on a multiply mediated network of senders and wires, recipients and relays” (77). A supposedly “disembodied” telegram was in fact written down on a material sheet of paper, transmitted via a complex physical network of machines and wires, and relied on the eyes, hands, and brains of several human bodies. The story of disembodied communication, in other words, left out a great deal of physical engagement.

*Telegraph Secrets* is ambivalent in its portrayal of telegraphic communication. Just as *Lady Audley’s Secret* seems on the surface to embrace the structures of the timetable, these stories often represent the telegraph as possessing the ability to detach content from physical context. The messages nearly always arrive successfully, as in the case of Amélie’s telegram to Vellac, suggesting that content can be transferred without physical means. Characters in the stories at various points emphasize the fact that messages can travel “quicker than lightning,” and Mortimer is described as a “modern
magician” who can “send the queries flying through sea and air” in a way seemingly detached from physical form (Hemyng 39, 57, 41).

Yet despite the successful telegraphing which occurs in the short story collection, these stories most often represent the embodiment of the telegraph system, as in the case of the many material factors leading to the interception of Amélie’s telegram. Ultimately, *Telegraph Secrets* works to undermine the telegraph’s claims of the disembodied flow of information by aggressively reasserting the material, physical nature of the process. Instead of direct communion between the minds of Vellac and Amélie, we are repeatedly reminded of the presence of an operator. Additionally, these stories also emphasize such features as the physical nature of the machine, and the physical messages which linger in the office even when the “essence” of the information has supposedly been sent on its way.

In these stories, we see information technology, and the investigations it enables, fitting more fully into the “sensational” side of the “sensational/rational” dichotomy. Unexpected embodiments give the telegraph an uncanny quality. Mortimer intercepts Amélie’s telegram not because he is looking for it or because he has some indication that she will telegraph soon. Instead, he simply steps to a machine at random to contact his boss and ask for a day off. From the operator of that machine, he accidentally learns of the message from Amélie. This accidental interception of the telegram forms the key evidence which the detective uses to solve the crime, but such a moment shows the strange, sensational nature of the telegraphic technology used here as evidence. As in the
case of the unruly timetables in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Telegraph Secrets* represents information acting in unruly, sensational ways.

The short stories take this critique too far, however, and the collection’s embodiments eventually intensify to the point where they become grotesque. The stories emphasize the materiality of parts of the telegraph process which were never particularly material to begin with. The telegraph’s codes, for example, were never an intensely “material” part of the system of telegraphic communication, but in *Telegraph Secrets* they sometimes become deeply material, even morphing into human characters speaking coded language.

Moreover, as the content of these stories insists on the physicality of the telegraph system, the form undermines this argument. The plots and characters repeat over and over again, with different names but similar stories. These repeated plot points and characters take on fluid, malleable identities; in other words, they take on properties more commonly associated with the telegraph’s disembodied flow of information. Even as the collection shows the embodiment of the telegraph, other textual features lose their materiality as they become abstract forms.

We know very little of Bracebridge Hemyng, but we can be fairly sure that he did not approach the question of telegraphs from a privileged perspective. Hemyng’s two main claims to fame are helping to gather data for the section on “Prostitution” in Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, and authoring most of the “Jack Harkaway” book series for boys, which first appeared in 1871 (Scott 142). The success of this series for boys would take him from England to America to write for *Frank Leslie’s*
Boys’ and Girls’ Weekly. Hemyng’s works dwindled in popularity even during his lifetime, and he was forced to return to London and his original profession of law, eventually dying penniless and practically forgotten (Johannsen). Hemyng has been virtually ignored critically, and this short-story collection has only rarely been examined by scholars. Still, from the details we do know of his biography, we can be fairly sure that this collection represents a view of the telegraph from the perspective of a person on the outside, rather than someone with a more intimate relationship to the telegraph office. That makes his emphasis on the embodied nature of telegraphic communication all the more surprising, since this emphasis critiques a dominant social discourse of the time.

*Telegraph Secrets* Critiques Discourse of Disembodiment

Repeatedly, the short stories in *Telegraph Secrets* emphasize the material nature of the telegraph technology, and thus they serve as a critique of the idea of disembodied information. Telegrams in these stories often must be delivered by hand or take a long time to be received, re-equating the telegraph with older technologies such as the post. For example, “Odds Against Them” centers on the unscrupulous Harry Serpentine, who swindles landowner Mr. Arden out of his estates. Mr. Arden dies of grief, and Serpentine works to wrest all the remaining property out of the hands of Arden’s two sons. On his deathbed, however, Serpentine is struck with remorse and wants to restore property to the Arden boys. He sends this urgent communication via a telegram. There is no boy in the office to deliver the message, so Mortimer, the operator, immediately puts on his hat and delivers the telegram by hand. Later, Mortimer states, “Had I not at once gone with the
telegram, Serpentine would have died without doing justice, and his wealth would have
gone to his brother,” rather than to the more deserving Arden boys (Hemyng 40).

Mortimer’s indirect role of transmitting the message is made more direct and material
here, as he physically takes the message to its destination.

Similarly, in “The Clandestine Bridal,” the narrative re-emphasizes the similarity
between a letter and a telegram in terms of the time frame required for response.

Mortimer is asked how long it would take to deliver a telegram, an inquiry to a French
detective about a mysterious Count. Mortimer replies that he should get the answer in “a
couple of hours, if the wires are clear,” and in fact, it is only twenty minutes before he
gets his response (Hemyng 57). However, this emphasis on the speed of the
communication is immediately undermined when they receive the message: “Henrade on
business in the provinces; will not return for ten days. Message shall be given when
back” (57). The fast message is replaced by a more regular timeline for the mail, or even
for a physical trip to France.

While these examples may appear to be somewhat commonplace today, actually
this portrayal of a slow, material telegraph system would have gone against a popular and
potent discourse of the telegraph’s pure, disembodied flow. Recovering the collection’s
relationship to this discourse allows us to better understand the narrative’s critique of
ideas of disembodied information. Many writers on the telegraph, in this period,
emphasized the supposed purity and spiritual nature of the communication, a discourse
directly tied to the purportedly “disembodied” nature of the communication. Menke notes
that the communication had imagined properties of being “transcendent and elusive…”
pure electrical signified” (74). After all, before this point with only a few exceptions, messages could travel only when someone physically took them to a new location. With the telegraph, the message arrived much more quickly, without the need for a physical object or a person to travel to the location. As James Carey sums up, the telegraph “permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation… [It] allowed messages to be separated from the physical movement of objects…” (157).

The telegraph’s apparent ability to decouple from the material was seen as promising everything from better interconnectedness to the arrival of world peace (74). In this reading, physical differences and bodily urges melt away, to be replaced by a pure communion of intellects through telegraphy. Sconce suggests that the “miraculous ‘disembodying’ presence evoked by Morse’s technology… suggested the tantalizing possibility of a realm where intelligence and consciousness existed independent of the physical body and its material limitations, be they social, sexual, political, mortal, or otherwise” (44). Shawn Rosenheim, similarly, suggests that telegraphy in this period was often seen as “metaphysical,” “by annihilating space and time, it allows humankind to escape its physical limitations” and enjoy a newly “disembodied consciousness” (93).

As these examples make evident, the most common metaphors for describing the telegraph’s supposedly disembodifying properties came from religion and spiritualism,

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22 For more on the entanglement of the message with the form and society in which it is transmitted, see Marshall McLuhan’s “The Medium is the Message.” McLuhan reminds us that the content of a message is less significant than the broader operation of the telegraph in society, or, as he puts it, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (9).

23 Jeffrey Sconce notes that “many believed telegraphic technology would lead to nothing less than a utopian age,” quoting suggestions that the world would become a panoptic “whispering gallery” where communication is universal and the human race is unified in a way comparable only to Christianity (Sconce 21-2).
already discourses in which the invisible could purportedly communicate with the everyday. Jay Clayton sees religious discourse as “a standard trope of the celebratory literature surrounding the telegraph,” as in, for example, the trope of angels riding across the ocean on telegraph wires (213). Spiritualism provided even more effective metaphors for understanding the technology, perhaps because of the telegraph’s early association with pseudo-science. Famously, when Samuel Morse initially attempted to get support from Congress for the first American lines, his proposal was ridiculed by one congressman who suggested that “they might as well start funding research into mesmerism” (Standage 46).

Even as the technology became more widespread and better understood, Victorians remained invested in the seemingly disembodied nature of telegraphic communication. In its most extreme examples, these initial connections with mesmerism and religion solidified into the idea that telegraphs enabled actual communication with the deceased. As Jeffrey Sconce explains:

Talking with the dead through raps and knocks, after all, was only slightly more miraculous than talking with the living yet absent through dots and dashes; both involved subjects reconstituted through technology as an entity at once interstitial and uncanny. Spiritualism attracted the belief of many converts because it provided a technically plausible system of explanation for these seemingly occult occurrences… (28)

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24 Morse did go on to gain support, but only by a narrow margin, which Standage suggests “reflected the widespread unease that the electric telegraph might still turn out to be nothing more than an elaborate conjuring trick” (46). In Britain, inventors William Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone faced similar skepticism that their invention might be a trick, and they were only able to sustain their first telegraph line when Cooke took over running it himself (45).
Communicating over long distances, in other words, made communicating with the dead seem more scientifically plausible.\textsuperscript{25} The link between the telegraph and the séance is intriguing in that it emphasizes how both genres grew around the promise of unmediated, pure communication in defiance of the contexts of distance and time. Communicating with the dead (or, via telepathy, with people in the future, past, or at great distances) was seen as a step, and only a small step, past the already miraculous connections which were to be made by the electric telegraph. Laura Otis notes that the telegraph and the telephone were technologies that “would have been dismissed as fantasies” only a hundred years before their invention, so that the perception was that “if the efficiency of communications technology continued to improve, it seemed reasonable to expect that networks would someday transmit thoughts themselves” (\textit{Networking} 180).\textsuperscript{26}

Even more dramatically, some believed that the telegraph had actually been invented by the dead, an extreme idea which shows the power of the discourse of disembodiment. Sconce notes that for some, telegraphy was “an actual technology of the afterlife, one invented by scientific geniuses in the world of the dead for the explicit purpose of instructing the land of the living in the principles of utopian reform” (12). In other words, the telegraph was seen as forming a direct link between living and dead minds, bridging the gap of mortality the same way that electric telegraphs bridged the gap between people in different areas. One spirit, purportedly channeled by a medium in

\textsuperscript{25} The reasons for this correlation are often a subject of scholarly interest. Menke writes that “sending sparks down the line, every telegraphic impulse turned mere letters and numbers into links between spirit and matter” (77). Citing Alison Winter’s \textit{Mesmerized}, Menke adds that “telegraphy and mesmerism shared a discourse of fluids, sympathy, and magnetic influence” (80). Laura Otis, moreover, notes that “When Myers coined the term “telepathy” in 1882, he undoubtedly had the telegraph in mind” (\textit{Networking} 182).

\textsuperscript{26} Mesmerism was also widely demonstrated in this period, which “reinforced people’s belief that one mind could influence another, and the reports of spiritualists suggested that minds could communicate not just across space but across time” (Otis, \textit{Networking} 180).
1874, stated that the spirits had literally given hints to Morse when he was designing the telegraph (Sconce 25). This is particularly interesting as a demonstration of the shift in which the technological is read as a part of the spiritual world, intensifying the perceived disembodiment of the technology.

In the light of the high pitch which this discourse reaches, *Telegraph Secrets*’s emphasis on even a delayed telegram or one that had to be delivered by hand would have been read as disruptive. Any mention of the operator or the physical traces of the message needs to be seen as a critique of the discourse of telegraphic disembodiment. When it reminds readers of the material nature of the telegraph, *Telegraph Secrets* shows that information is not actually disembodied.

**Embodied Telegrams, Embodied Operators**

*Telegraph Secrets* fights against the discourse of disembodiment by repeatedly emphasizing the material aspects of the telegraphic communication system. The text, for example, repeatedly references telegrams that have already been sent. On multiple occasions, when a detective comes in hoping to get a clue to criminal activity, the operator is able to share old, already-transmitted telegrams with him.

On the surface, these traces of sent telegrams seem to show that the message’s content has been successfully decoupled from its material form. Such an act, however, actually shows another way in which the discourse of disembodiment fails. Supposedly, the content, disembodied from its physical form, is sent along the line. But a purely disembodied message would not leave a trace at the original station. The telegraph rests
on a claim that once the content of the message is sent, it is actually gone, detached from physical context and in a new place. The original handwritten telegram, while sometimes saved briefly for reference, becomes unimportant as soon as the message is transmitted. The content, the “essence” of the message, is already in another place. User comfort with this process depends on their acceptance of abstract information, or information which can flow between different forms. Yet unlike a physical letter, the material object of the original message remains at the sending station. The lingering physical telegram at the sending station is a reminder that information cannot be so easily disembodied. For, of course, the message has not actually moved uncomplicatedly to another location, but has left a physical trace.

The following example (fig. 6) provides just one counterpoint to the idea that such a physical trace is unimportant. This is a telegram written from Queen Victoria to Benjamin Disraeli:
The “form” of this telegram—in this case, literally a form—is supposed to be no different than the version given to the recipient, which is typed or handwritten by a telegraph operator in the receiving station. As long as the content reaches the recipient intact, the story goes, the information has been fully transmitted. However, this particular telegram was preserved for over a hundred years, because the material presence of such a telegram, with its historical import, is significant, even when the content of the message has been passed along. While this example is of course an extreme one, it does serve to emphasize the immense possible importance of such a physical “trace.”

*Telegraph Secrets* repeatedly suggests, moreover, that decoupling information from physical context actually can proliferate even *more* materiality, instead of eliminating materiality. The collection repeatedly shows Mortimer saving such traces of
sent telegrams, an act which challenges the disembodiment of the telegraph. Mortimer, who writes that one customer’s features and name are “indelibly engraven on my memory” is a compulsive transcriber of all kinds of information (Hemyng 86). He transcribes many telegrams twice, both sending them over the line and writing them down for his own reference. When questioned by a detective about an unusual telegram, Mortimer is immediately able to recover the message because he has “for many years past made it a practice to enter all striking telegrams in a book” (91). For a real telegraph operator, such a book would have been illegal. As Richard Menke notes, “both the plots of these stories and their publication by Mr. Mortimer would have audaciously violated the Telegraph Act of 1863, which established ‘a penalty not exceeding twenty pounds’ for any telegraph worker who delayed a message or divulged its content” (174–5). Mortimer’s preservation of such a trace, therefore, should be seen as a somewhat subversive act. While it does seem to show the disembodied nature of the content, it also emphasizes how such content can create even more material traces.

Most extremely, Telegraph Secrets itself claims to be the published collection of such material traces. The narrator writes, “The Author of the following Stories has been enabled, during a period of many years spent in the service of a widely-celebrated Telegraph Company, to collect a series of most romantic incidents, which are well worthy of perpetuation in print” (1). The original messages linger. Instead of being passed purely through the telegraphic medium from sender to receiver, they leave physical traces in Mortimer’s book, and ultimately, in the narrative for readers to uncover and re-read. The overall premise of Telegraph Secrets—literally, secrets transmitted by
telegraph, stored and revealed by the operator—must have been read as a fictional violation of trust, a symbolic counter-example to the comfortable social myths of the telegraph. Within *Telegraph Secrets*, Mortimer’s book is another reminder of the physical nature of the telegraph technology, revealing that the message does not actually vanish once it is conveyed on the wires.

Along with the presence of physical messages, the presence of a physical operator also emphasizes the material nature of a telegram’s transmission, fighting against the idea of the telegram as painlessly disembodied and re-embodied on the other end of the line. Mortimer’s presence in *Telegraph Secrets*, as Richard Menke notes, generally increases over time. He barely appears in the earlier stories, with the first-person “I” only appearing near the end of the story at the final moment of revelation. In later stories, however, he takes on an increasingly prominent role, making it increasingly clear that a person is involved in the supposedly “disembodied” telegraphic communication.

In the final collection’s final story, “A Mystic Message,” the presence of Mortimer’s body becomes the most insistent. His presence challenges the idea that telegraphic communication represents a pure flow of disembodied information. In this story, Mortimer becomes interested in a cryptic telegram addressed to “Ernest Raby.” When he receives a short holiday from work, he wanders to the street where Mr. Raby lives, thinking he might learn more about the telegram. He accidentally inquires at Mr. Raby’s house, and decides to impersonate Mr. Raby’s new valet. He accompanies Mr. Raby on his journey to discover the secret triggered by the telegram, which eventually leads them to a dying gypsy. The gypsy, an old lover of Mr. Raby’s, reveals that she has
imprisoned Mr. Raby’s missing love Adele for several years in a dungeon, out of jealousy. They successfully rescue Adele, and the story ends happily.

Such a story reinforces, through exaggeration, the fact that telegraphic communication was actually deeply entwined in the material bodies of the operators. While operators did not typically show up at the houses of their customers, their bodies were interposed in their customers’ private communication. Rather than being disembodied, the telegraph technology required multiple bodies of operators, acting as intermediaries in the private affairs of their customers. Individual telegrams were read and transmitted by up to dozens of people, moving along a variety of relays and touched by many hands on the way. Messages first were written down on forms, which required the user to specify personal information such as the name and address of the sender and recipient. Depending on the office, these messages might be handed directly to the clerk, or to another employee who might pass along the message by hand or by pneumatic tube to the operator. In any case, at this stage the basic information of the message was usually briefly recorded. The messages, in a large office, might then be transferred by a superintendent to the appropriate machine to communicate to the station indicated on the telegram. The operator would then ring a bell, which would ring electric bells at all stations on his line. Upon receiving confirmation, the operator would translate the message into code and use his machine to transmit the code. At the destination station, another operator would receive the message, sometimes recording it herself, and sometimes dictating the different letters out loud to a helper (Beauchamp 69–71). Depending on how far the message had to travel, the process was often repeated, with the
receiving operator relaying the message to the new station. Once the message arrived at
the nearest station, it was again transcribed onto a slip of paper and given to a messenger,
who would physically take it to the house of the recipient (64). Depending on the line and
the destination, therefore, any number from two to a dozen people would read and touch
the telegram, while even more people would know such general information as the
addresses and names of the customers. These material intermediaries work against the
idea of a pure, disembodied information flow.

*Telegraph Secrets* mocks the “disembodied” discourse of the telegraph, which
imagines that all of these people can just be ignored. The operators were ideally blank,
mechanical slates, who would unthinkingly transmit the information without reading,
remembering, or changing its content. In fact, Laura Otis sees this social need as being
directly correlated to the preference for female over male telegraphists, since women
were believed to have less agency and therefore to be less disruptively present. But
Mortimer’s unabashed physical presence in his customer’s life in “A Mystic Message”
calls on readers to remember the many people who make telegraphic communication
possible.

In doing so, the story subtly pokes fun at people’s willingness to see the operator
as part of a machine which thoughtlessly transmits disembodied consciousesses, rather

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27 Women, Otis writes, were thought to have “a good system of involuntary muscles” and be “faster than
men in light rhythmical activities,” a mechanical, thoughtless dexterity tied to a belief in women’s “lack of
agency in their movements” which encouraged employers to think of women as machines (*The Other End
of the Wire* 194). In other words, the decreased agency of the female telegraph operator made her seem
like free, thoughtless conduit of information, and therefore ideal for the telegraph office. Jill Galvan
critiques this vision, reminding us that “the automatic woman may well have served, at the core of turn-of-
the-century knowledge and communication networks, as an object of faith—like all such objects, a hoped-
for reality that will not bear significant scrutiny,” but there is little doubt that this automatic figure was an
ideal of the telegraph network (159).
than as a real person. Mortimer finds it laughably easy to get hired as a valet at Mr. Raby’s house, though he has no experience, lacks the proper clothes, and doesn’t know anything about his employer. He simply impersonates the real valet, and later thinks how “excessively amusing” it is that the real valet will later arrive and be turned away as an imposter (Hemyng 115). Almost upon meeting him, Mr. Raby decides that Mortimer is capable of being entrusted with some of the deepest secrets of his life, because “the gentleman who recommended you… told me that you were highly trustworthy… I shall not hesitate to place confidence in you” (114). These recommendations were of course intended for the real valet, but Mortimer is able to cleanly step into his place. While it works out in the end, there is a caution here against sending messages without noticing the person who is sending them.

When Mortimer invades Mr. Raby’s life, he taps into one of the most serious social anxieties about telegraphic communication—the possibility of the operators overhearing private conversations. Such an anxiety is of course highly disruptive to the idea of disembodied information. The presence of people who might carry and transmit messages makes the telegraph less of a unique new method for disembodied communion of minds and makes it more similar to older communication systems such as the post.

Historically, operators inevitably had to know the content of messages, and depending on the system being used, it was also often possible to “listen in” on other messages being transmitted along the line. Telegraph lines “radiated out from the central telegraph offices in major towns,” and “each telegraph office could only communicate with offices on the same spoke of the network, and the central telegraph office at the end
of the line” (Standage 63). That meant that unless the message happened to be directed to another station on the same line, it had to be sent to the central hub and then relayed along a different line. That meant that the telegram would be read by additional operators and added to the possibility that it could be “overheard” by others using the line.

Understandably, as people increasingly understood the path their messages were taking, they raised concerns about privacy and how messages might be “overheard” by strangers. As early as 1853, the *Quarterly Review* called the “violation of all secrecy” in private telegrams the “one great objection” to and “grievous fault” in the technology, noting with patent disgust that “in any case half a dozen people must be cognizant of every word addressed by one person to another” (110). While telegraph clerks were mostly honest, these criticisms of the technology show how disruptive the presence of the operator was to the discourse of disembodied communication.

*Telegraph Secrets* plays on these fears and emphasizes the technology’s embodiment with the repeated device of characters overhearing key information. In some cases, the text first shows a telegram being overheard, and then intensifies the embodiment by a later scene showing the same act of overhearing in person. In “Quicker than Lightning,” for example, Mortimer and a police detective intercept a telegram passed between Kitely and Abrams, two criminal confederates who have stolen a great deal of gold. Later on in the story, this moment is repeated, except in physical form. Mortimer and the police detective catch up to the criminals, and are now able to physically overhear their conversation: “As we sat behind Kitely and Abrams, they were unaware of our proximity, and discoursed with the utmost freedom” (Hemyng 49).
The short story “Working the Needle” shows criminals attempting to circumvent the physical body of the operator, only to find that it is impossible. In this story, a group of intended assassins of French Emperor Napoleon II decide that they need a man broadcasting in the telegraph office in London to help with their plans. Mr. Proby, one of the would-be assassins, accordingly seeks out Mortimer and bribes him to let him use the lines after hours. Proby plans to use the almost-abandoned office to communicate directly to a confederate who has similarly infiltrated a French telegraph office. This method of communication is closer to the disembodied ideal—the men believe they will be able to talk via the technology and circumvent the additional bodies of the telegraph operators.

Again, however, Proby and his gang are brought down when the telegraph operator is able to “overhear” their plans, though Mortimer does so in an unusual way. Mortimer sees Proby sending a damaging message. At the time, Britain still used needle telegraphs, a visual form of communication. Unlike the “American sounder,” needle telegraphs were operated by twisting levers. Several models were in use during the 1860s, and the text gives us no clues as to which model Mortimer used (nor was Hemyng necessarily interested in making such fine distinctions). But most would have included a needle or two which spelled out a message with movement, as in the case of, for example, Cooke’s two-needle telegraph, which indicated letters based on different needle positions (fig. 7):
Mortimer is able to read the message from the reflection in the glass of the moving needle:

…although I might be a considerable distance from the dial, I could by constant practice read every word that appeared upon its eloquent surface, as clearly as if I had been perusing the freshly-printed pages of a book… I had my back to him at the time, but the dial was reflected in a glass which stood over the mantelpiece. Actuated by a purposeless curiosity, I looked carefully at the reflection of the dial, and watched the needle as it revolved to and fro.” (Hemyng 68)

Even in an unusual situation where the operator is specifically supposed to vanish, Mortimer is still a part of the communication system. The suggestion here is that the operator’s physical presence cannot be disconnected from the telegraph. Significantly, this passage places the operator in the same point of view as the machine. Seeing the movements of the needle reflected in the mirror, Mortimer is actually looking at the
needle’s movements in reverse, as if he himself is a telegraph machine looking up at its operator. Such an attitude stands in contrast to the social perception of the telegraph operator as a blank, unthinking conduit, part of an equally unthinking machine.

**Grotesque Embodiments**

So far, I have traced several ways in which *Telegraph Secrets* responds to the discourse of disembodied information by reinforcing the materiality of the process of telegraphic communication. The text’s attempts to re-embody telegraphic communication, however, also exaggerate this strategy to a grotesque level. By “grotesque,” I mean that the text represents the telegraph’s embodiment but shows it distorted in its proportions. Embodiment in these stories is over-exaggerated to the extent that it begins to appear extravagant and bizarre. Like the overwhelming train times in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the unexpected presence of physical bodies in *Telegraph Secrets* becomes sensationalized and extreme.

Overheard conversations serve to reinforce the physical existence of bodies in the telegraph’s transmission system, but the text includes the device so often that it ceases to seem “rational.” Instead, the device begins to lose credibility in its over-emphasis of the extremely unlikely coincidence. “Quicker than Lightning,” in addition to showing Mortimer and the detective eavesdropping on the criminals, also includes a scene where one of the criminals overhears the detective and Mortimer’s plans. The two young lovers in “The Clandestine Bridal” plot to run away together to avoid Kathleen’s father’s attempts to marry her to the unscrupulous Count Soubise, but as they speak, the Count
Soubise “was concealed in a thicket, and had overheard every word that had fallen from their lips” (Hemyng 59). In “A Murderer at Large,” Mortimer and a detective stand together inside the telegraph office discussing their plans to catch the multiple-murderer Vellac. The absent Vellac coincidentally turns out to be entering the office at exactly that moment, opens the door and listens to their plans, without being noticed by either Mortimer or the detective (91). Later, the detective comments:

“Very awkward, the man coming in at the time I was disclosing my plans to you. Who’d have thought it?”
“No one. It was one of those fortuitous occurrences which it is almost impossible to guard against.” (92)

Such examples of coincidental re-embodiment of physical presence create grotesque disruptions in the narrative. The exaggeration of overheard conversations leads us to see the sensational nature of most of Mortimer’s evidence, which comes from him listening in on telegraph messages.

The narrative also unexpectedly insists on embodying parts of the telegraphic process which were not actually embodied in real life. Recovering the presence of the telegraph operator or the material trace of the message is one thing, but the text also, for example, works to embody codes, which were never a particularly material part of the process to begin with. “Quicker than Lightning” shows the process of a code gradually taking on human form, suggesting a disconnection in the text’s efforts to reinsert materiality. The story begins when a man, later revealed as the criminal “G. K.,” comes in to the telegraph office and questions Mortimer about how messages can be sent. Mortimer’s answers initially seem to emphasize the non-materiality of telegraphic communication:
“Will this go quickly?” he asked, handing me the sheet which he had disfigured with his illegible calligraphy.

“Yes, sir.”

“Quicker than lightning, eh?”

“Quite as quickly, sir, as soon as we put it on the wires.”

“Ahh! a magnificent invention! Really, science advances in these days with gigantic strides.”

“So it does, sir.”

“Just read that over, and see if there will be any difficulty in transmitting it.”

A strange message it was, too; I could not make head or tail of it, and gave him credit for some talent in manufacturing cipher. It ran thus:—

“Ihttn a gftsas biltn brtrma aot’apob tcsi wtma 3 otm—ave aken he otess nd old rom he afe nd hall e n iverpool o ight e eady o eevee e nd t nce ake assage n oard he unard teamer sis hich eaves he ersey t clock omorrow orning.”

“Can you make anything of it?” he inquired, with a dry smile.

“Not much, sir.” (41)

This early passage initially seems to reinforce the concept that information can be disembodied. Mortimer emphasizes the mystical speed and power of the telegram, which works “quicker than lightning.” He also downplays his own role in the transmission process: G. K. asks whether he can transmit messages in other languages, and Mortimer informs him that “We merely send the letters, and we do not care if the words are Sanscrit, so long as they are properly transmitted, and made intelligible to your correspondent” (Hemyng 40). The customer then asks about messages in cipher. Mortimer assures him that “You may rely upon the secrecy of our employés,” but when the man insists, Mortimer gives way immediately, merely warning him that ciphers are charged at a higher rate. When Mortimer does see the cipher, it is unintelligible to him, reinforcing the idea that he is an empty conduit of a disembodied information flow.

The process of embodying the telegram begins conservatively. The text again brings up the idea of a physical trace of the message left at the scene. Mortimer, as is his
wont, copies down the message, again repeating to us that he sends it “quicker than lightning” (a particularly ironic re-emphasis, as he is actually delaying the telegram in that moment in order to illegally copy it down) (42). Soon after, a famous detective, Mr. Dudley, comes to the telegraph office on the track of the criminal. Seeing the cipher, he tells Mortimer to “Let me bewilder myself over it for half an hour” (44). A little over a half hour later, after painstaking work, Dudley reveals his solution. The first letters in each word have been transposed to the beginning of the message, and the message is, “I have taken the notes and gold from the safe, and shall be in Liverpool to-night. Be ready to receive me, and at once take a passage on board the Cunard Steamer Isis, which leaves the Mersey at 3 o’clock to-morrow morning” (44).

But shortly thereafter, the process of embodiment becomes far more extreme, and coded messages start to freely proliferate in the text. The customer’s initials are shown to match the criminal G. K., making the figure himself into a cryptogram, a person whose name is represented by symbols. G. K. is revealed to be a master of disguise, utterly unrecognizable. This begins to equate him more with the original coded message, since like the message, G. K. is not immediately readable, but instead is capable of changing his forms. The original use of a code is embodied into a series of physical disguises. The detective later notes: “you may depend upon it that he has a dozen or more disguises; he will pop into some private place, and slip on a great coat and otherwise change his appearance” (47).

Then, even more extremely, we find that G. K. has suddenly and inexplicably begun speaking in coded communication. This is a more excessive example of his
disguises—the original coded message has been embodied into a character who seemingly cannot stop speaking in codes. Disguised as a sailor, G. K. eavesdrops on Mortimer and the detective in a pub, and begins speaking to them in language which embodies his earlier interest in cryptography. He begins this strange passage by asking the detective if he would like a drink:

“Will you take a glass of something before you start?”
“Will you?” asked Dudley.
“I don’t mind if I do.”
“What shall it be?”
“A glass of mother-in-law—that’s always my tap,” said the sailor.
“What’s that?” asked Dudley, rather puzzled.
“Why old and bitter,” replied the sailor, with a loud laugh...
“Oh, that’s a chalk to you,” exclaimed Dudley. “My friend and I will have the same. What’s to pay?” he added.
“A leather-dresser,” answered the sailor.
“You’re getting beyond me again,” said Dudley.
“Don’t you understand?”
“No more than I did at first. What’s a leather-dresser?”
“A tanner; in other words, a sixpence.”
“Oh! then three glasses of mother-in-law cost a leather-dresser. I see. It appears that I’m learning something.” (Hemyng 46)

Just as G. K. coded his telegram, codes now infiltrate his speech, turning him into a living cipher telegraphing coded information through rhyming slang. Dudley, the detective, must painstakingly interpret these codes, just as he earlier struggled to decode the telegram.

Codes are, of course, a new and unique part of the telegraphic communication system, and the use of needle systems and sound systems relying on Morse code alike brought codes into more prominence in society. But strictly speaking, codes are rarely significant for their physical materiality. “Quicker than Lightning,” therefore, reinforces the collection’s overall theme of slowly emerging materiality, shown in the increased
presence of the operator, etc. but it misplaces this theme onto something that was never particularly material—the codes of telegraphic communication.

In fact, unlike the operators, machines, or physical traces of messages which show the telegraph’s technology, codes were often seen by Victorians as a way to reinforce the disembodied nature of the communication. Personal and commercial codes were, in fact, often used to preserve the privacy of the telegram and to sidestep part of the materiality of the telegraph—the presence of the operators. Initially, ciphered messages were reserved for government use, but this was hard to enforce, and the 1865 creation of the International Telegraph Union discarded these laws and permitted messages to be sent in code for the first time. Codes quickly became common for business use (Standage 111). One article notes:

…the publicity to which telegraphic correspondence has been subjected has frequently raised the indignation of our large commercial firms; and, to guard against every possible evil, the Postmaster-General has just sanctioned the introduction of a telegraphic code for public use, which will come into play so soon as the telegraphs are worked by the Government” (“The Bolton Code and the Post Office Telegraph System” 2).

More common were the commercial codes, which enjoyed a lot of success. Robert Slater’s 1870 *Telegraphic Code, to Ensure Secresy in the Transmission of Telegrams* addresses the advantages of codes in the context of the new nationalization of the telegraph system, in language which evokes the peculiar ambiguities so often present in the discourse of the telegram:
On the 1st of February, 1870, the telegraph system throughout the United Kingdom passes into the hands of the Government, who will work the lines by Post Office officials. In other words, those who have hitherto so judiciously and satisfactorily managed the delivery of our sealed letters will in future be entrusted also with the transmission and delivery of our open letters in the shape of telegraphic communications, which will thus be exposed not only to the gaze of public officials, but from the necessity of the case must be read by them. Now in large or small communities (particularly perhaps in the latter) there are always to be found prying spirits, curious as to the affairs of their neighbors, which they think they can manage so much better than the parties chiefly interested, and proverbially inclined to gossip. (Slater iii)

The passage draws a strange contrast between the government employees in the post-office, who are judicious and satisfactory managers of sealed information, and government employees telegraph office, where these same people become individual gossipers in small communities. Coding books in general play into the fear of the material aspects of transmission—i.e., the operators—by instead emphasizing the supposed ability of information to freely morph and flow into a variety of safer, coded forms.

In fairness to Telegraph Secrets, some aspects of coding are distinctly material and might be seen as justifying the unexpected embodiment of codes in this text. Historically, coded texts would have been associated with such material realities as cost and the dangers of transcription errors. Telegrams in code often had to be checked multiple times by operators and thus went more slowly, since these messages were particularly “prone to garbling” (Nickles 81). Telegraph companies made the decision to charge more for cipher messages because asking telegraph operators to “accurately transcribe lists of context-less figures” often led to errors (97). The obvious result of this issue was the creation of cipher books which allowed senders to use a string of random
words to stand in for much longer messages. *Bloomer’s Commercial Cryptograph* (1874), one such book, addresses the problems of cipher messages in its choice of easy-to-code words, which “have been carefully selected to prevent errors in transmission by telegraph” (Bloomer 3).

Such transcription errors were a real issue, and one which does tend to reinforce the materiality of coding. Nickles notes that through World War I, telegrams had to be manually coded and decoded, a process which tended to delay the messages to the extent that “the seriousness of cipher-related holdups led foreign ministries to send uncoded messages when speed was crucial and secrecy unimportant” (81). At the least serious level, garbled telegrams could lead to lawsuits, which was one factor encouraging the Victorian creation of contract law (183). At the most serious level, garbled and delayed telegrams could lead to strained international relations. David Paull Nickles identifies a transcription error as one key factor leading to the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, suggesting that a substitution of “9th” for “26th” delayed one of Bismarck’s plots and enabled the French to discover it before Bismarck had successfully put a Prussian sympathizer in charge of Spain, leading to the war. Nickles adds that “the tendency to attribute this accident to the error of a German clerk obscures the responsibility of those who designed and oversaw a system so lacking in redundancy that a trivial failure could trigger a major crisis” (187). Not only did a telegram sometimes arrive with changed content, but there was no way to immediately realize that the content had been changed.

Still, even with these associations of coding with human error, the codes’ connection to materiality is tenuous, and therefore, it’s somewhat strange that *Telegraph*
Secrets would embody a code into such an unlikely character as G. K. Why spend time on codes when operators and messages were much more effective counters to the discourse of disembodied telegraphic communication?

What happens, I would argue, is that the text exaggerates the strategy of embodiment to the extent that it starts to become grotesque or mismatched. There is a historical precedence for this problem. New users of the telegraph often struggled with understanding a telegraph’s embodiment, and imagined it to be embodied in misplaced ways. According to one story, possibly apocryphal, a woman in Prussia goes to the telegraph office to send a dish of sauerkraut to her son. When the woman is told that it is impossible, she is surprised, and demands, “how could so many soldiers have been sent to France by telegraph?” (Standage 66–7). The story’s provenance is dubious, but it does point to the difficulties of understanding the technology of the telegraph. Even those who understood that messages were passed electrically rather than physically demonstrated the mistaken belief that messages made noise as they traveled—slight sounds from the wind in the wires were mistakenly equated with the sounds of messages zooming by from one location to another, for example (Standage 67).

Such grotesque embodiment and emphasis on coincidence, moreover, is not a flaw in Hemyng’s work, but is a fairly consistent trope of detective stories about telegraphs more generally, as the following two examples will briefly show. This consistency points to the broader difficulties of negotiating the telegraph technology’s incompatible discourses of disembodiment and materiality. An undated short story from The Gentleman’s Journal, “The Cipher Dispatch,” similarly features strangely overheard
conversations and unlikely coincidences. In this story, a businessman hires a clerk, Gamnett. One day the businessman finds what seems to be a cipher code on the floor near Gamnett’s desk, and, thinking nothing of it, he puts it into his pocket. Months later, the businessman leaves a large quantity of money in the safe with his clerk to watch it overnight, and goes to visit a friend of his who happens to be a telegraph operator. The telegraph operator, in a series of extreme coincidences, relays a message from Gamnett revealing the clerk’s scheme to steal the money. The businessman just happens to still have the cipher code in his pocket from months before, and he is able to crack the cryptogram and save his money.

To take yet another example, the Sherlock Holmes story, “The Missing Three-Quarter,” shows the pattern of a code becoming embodied as a human. Watson notes that while “we were fairly accustomed to receive weird telegrams at Baker Street,” a cryptic telegram about recovering a “right wing three-quarter,” was particularly puzzling to himself and Holmes (Doyle 387). The telegram is followed by their client, Mr. Overton, who speaks the specialized coded language of rugby, making him a human version of the coded telegram which he earlier sent to them:

What am I to do?… There’s Moorhouse, first reserve, but he is trained as a half, and he always edges right in on to the scrum instead of keeping out on the touch-line. He’s a fine place-kick, it’s true, but, then, he has no judgment, and he can’t sprint for nuts. Why, Morton or Johnson, the Oxford fliers, could romp round him. Stevenson is fast enough, but he couldn’t drop from the twenty-five line, and a three-quarter who can’t either punt or drop isn’t worth a place for pace alone… (388–9)

As Overton spouts out this coded language, he drives home his points by “the slapping of a brawny hand upon… [his] knee” (389). In other words, Overton repeats the codes from
his telegram while broadcasting his words with a physical slap and noise similar to the motion and sound of the telegram operator in the 1890s, when Britain had almost entirely shifted to the use of the American sounder. Solving the mystery will require Holmes to solve yet another truncated telegram and invade the space of the telegraph office. Here Holmes, like Mortimer before him, uses disconnection of abstract information to masquerade as the sender of a message, allowing him to resolve the mystery.

The tropes and oddities of *Telegraph Secrets*, in other words, are the tropes of telegraph detective fiction more generally. In such stories, a telegraph’s modes of communication are re-embodied, but in the wrong way; the embodiment is wrong, not expressing the real ways in which a telegraph was a very material process. The fact that this trope appears more widely demonstrates to us how difficult it was for fiction to accurately imagine telegraphic communication. Ultimately, *Telegraph Secrets*’s efforts to reinforce the idea of embodiment ends up paradoxically creating a textual aesthetic in which embodiment threatens to disappear, as I will discuss in the following section.

**Form vs. Content**

I argued in the previous section that *Telegraph Secrets* is invested in the embodiment of the telegraphic system, but it takes this strategy so far that embodiment begins to become grotesque. This section traces the opposing side of that aesthetic failure—as the telegraph becomes more material, the other details of the text become disembodied. The physical bodies and plot points in the different stories demonstrate a tendency to morph freely into each other. As the details of the text become more
malleable and fluid, they lose their connection to the material and begin to seem like flattened aesthetic forms.

Many characters in *Telegraph Secrets* have fluid identities which link them to the supposedly disembodied properties of telegraphic communication. As I note in the introduction, disembodied information supposedly was able to flow, as pure essence, from one medium to another. As Menke argues, “Once the world became bodiless information, it could be collected, managed, or processed systematically, and could enter the network as flow” (20). Similarly, the characters in *Telegraph Secrets* seem to be able to morph fluidly between identities. The con artist, who can alter his identity and appearance seemingly at the slightest whim, is a recurring figure in these stories. These characters freely switch their identities, reinforcing the mutable nature of the characters across stories. A man described by the detective as “my playful Alphonse Garrè!” can easily show up in England as the “Count Soubise” in “The Clandestine Bridal” (Hemyng 63). In “Caught at Last,” we learn that Desmond De Vigne:

…had lived very nearly everywhere. He was continually shifting his quarters, and the Trade Protections Societies were indignant at the versatility of his talent, which prevented them from putting their subscribers on their guard. If he levanted from one place as Hargrave, he would turn up at another as Grosvenor; and thus the little game, whose object was nothing more or less than plunder, went gaily on. (2)

Desmond De Vigne, here, has assumed some of the supposedly disembodied properties of the telegraph technology. Like the telegram that arrives on different paper with someone else’s handwriting, De Vigne shows up at places with different names, challenging the idea that identity must be specific to be meaningful.
Why would it matter that identity is fluid in these stories? It’s significant because malleable, fluid identity was one of the main features associated in this time with the disembodying properties of the technology. Real operators of the time were invisible to each other, and people’s bodies seemed to shift form when they touched the telegraph. As Stubbs points out, while operators were supposed to identify each other, and could sometimes recognize each other’s “voices,” it was still “theoretically possible to misrepresent oneself, to engage in a covert form of masquerade, trying on a new body and a new social identity” (Stubbs 92). Laura Otis traces the same topic in her considerations of telegraph literature, a genre of the 1860s and 1870s which “promised vast new knowledge and acquaintanceship but never quite replaced the reassuring certainty of physical presence” (*Networking* 183). Telegraphic writing of the mid- to late-century includes repeated examples of telegraphists masquerading as different genders or identities, and of romances built along the wires which evaporate with physical presence.  

Lest we find a moral imperative here, the detectives themselves demonstrate the same pattern of abstract fluidity as the con artists and criminals do. Three different detectives from three different stories are almost indistinguishable—Mr. Dudley, Mr. Henrade, and Mr. Drake. Both Mr. Dudley and Mr. Henrade are attacked in the moment of catching the criminal, though Mr. Henrade escapes. Mr. Drake and Mr. Dudley are both overheard by the criminal while they are in the act of making their plans. All three

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28 For more on writing written for and by telegraphists and how such texts show fluid identity, see Laura Otis’s *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (2001).
enter the story already tracking the criminal. Ultimately, all three end up being shadows of each other.

More extremely, the repeated tropes shared between the stories threaten to erode all forms of materiality in the imagined world of the text. In other words, the story’s specific details begin to take on the properties more frequently associated with disembodied abstract information, until the text’s details begin to become fluid and non-specific. “A Run on the Bank,” the sixth story in the collection, is particularly fluid in its repetition of details. The story relies on two “stock” plots, which I call the “romance” plot and the “ruin” plot.

*Both of* these plots appear in very similar ways in other parts of the collection, creating a fluid identity for the story’s characters. The “romance” plot involves a daughter preferring a poor man to her father’s rich, prestigious choice. In “A Run on the Bank,” beautiful Agnes Westland wants to marry Arthur Lyons, a poor clerk, but her father John Westland wants her to marry the wealthy Coulson Masters, a man at the head of the bullion trade. When he proposes the marriage to Agnes, she admits she is in love with Arthur, and her father flies into a rage, forbids them to see each other, and packs Arthur away to Australia. This “stock” plot was also used in “The Clandestine Bridal.” In this story, wealthy Mr. Warner tries to force his daughter, the beautiful Kathleen Warner, to marry the titled Count Soubise, but she is in love with a poor man, Oliver Fenton. “Forging the Will” also shows a similar instance of a woman seeking love against her father’s wishes.
The “ruin” plot, of one man swindling another of his wealth, similarly appears in “A Run on the Bank” and several other stories. Masters threatens to ruin Westland if he doesn’t force his daughter Agnes to marry him. Westland changes his mind and decides to take Agnes’s part. Masters, for revenge, withdraws his money from Westland’s bank, creating a run which ruins Westland. Westland slowly builds himself back up in the fur trade, and Masters ruins him in that trade as well, a recapitulation of the same plot twice in a single story. The “ruin” plot had also appeared in “Odds Against Them,” in which Harry Serpentine swindles Mr. Arden through bad investments. Elias Sydmonton, from “A Murderer at Large,” similarly is a once-prosperous merchant who is in debt through bad investments.

While it is fairly likely that any collection of inexpensive short stories from the era might have some reliance on stock plots and characters, it’s worth keeping in mind how deeply such repetitions tend to undermine the central argument the collection makes about embodiment. Even while the text insists on the material nature of the telegraph, its repetitions erode the idea of materiality and the text’s details begin to read like abstract information—fluid, malleable, and disconnected from any definite physicality. The telegraph may appear embodied in these stories, but all other fictional bodies become fluid.

To better trace this phenomenon, I tracked several repeated tropes. This is not a comprehensive list by any means, but does represent a handful of plots, characters, and symbols which appear repeatedly across the collections. Whenever a trope appears in the text, it is indicated with an “x” in the charts below (tables 2-5).
Table 2. Mercantile plot points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Swindling</th>
<th>Forged Signature</th>
<th>Estate Lost</th>
<th>Stock exchange speculation</th>
<th>Ruin</th>
<th>Merchant purchased estate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caught at Last</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Odds Against Them</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quicker than Lightning</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Clandestine Bridal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working the Needle</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forging the Will</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Murderer at Large</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Run on the Bank</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Mystic Message</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Romance plot points.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Forced marriage</th>
<th>Daughter loves against father's will</th>
<th>Father wants prestige</th>
<th>Wedding broken altar</th>
<th>Daughter clandestine bridal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caught at Last</td>
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<td>Odds Against Them</td>
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<td>Quicker than Lightning</td>
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<td>The Clandestine Bridal</td>
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<td>Working the Needle</td>
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<td>Forging the Will</td>
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<td>A Murderer at Large</td>
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<td>A Run on the Bank</td>
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<td>A Mystic Message</td>
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The density of the overlapping features visible here is significant. Similarities tend to cluster in only a few stories for each of the main plot threads I have identified, the mercantile and the romance plots, showing how closely stories with the same plot theme are connected. Furthermore, it is worth noting how many individual details these stories
have in common. Having a detective figure is one thing, but having two detectives attacked on the very moment of the arrest, in exactly the same way, in two consecutive stories, surely undermines the embodiment of both characters. It is not impossible that almost any collection of short stories, especially those in a similar genre (i.e., the crime story) would share a similar range of features in common. It’s quite likely that villains would be described as snakelike, for example, and that a repeated plot would involve a father trying to force a daughter to marry against her will. The adoption of so many tropes, however, does serve to reinforce the idea of transcendent, abstract information, which survives unchanged through its mediation within different stories.²⁹

It’s also worth noting how much these stories are intertwined with each other in their formal features, represented in figure 8. This network visualizes the above charts. Each of the nodes (circles) in this chart represents one of the collection’s stories, while each edge (line) is a shared feature the stories have in common. Thicker edges mean the stories share multiple identifiable features. Any single line between stories, therefore, would demonstrate a conflict between these stories’ content and their form, for it represents a moment in which a supposedly “physical” detail within the represented world becomes disembodied, turning into a fluid textual feature.

²⁹ The identification of these features is somewhat, though not entirely, subjective. Most features, like an apoplectic fit, would be equally identified by all readers, but I made no attempt here to classify every feature of each story, and instead searched for congruencies.
The network shows us just how prevalent fluidity is in this collection. Every single story has at least a few features in common with other stories. “Caught at Last,” the first story in the collection, is relatively unconnected, but later stories are deeply intertwined with each other, as in the case of the strong links between “A Clandestine Bridal,” and “A Run on the Bank.” The close formal similarities undercut the attempts in
the individual stories to assert the material, since so many of the text’s details in these stories end up turning into general forms.

Conclusion

The 1867 publication of *Telegraph Secrets* capitalizes on the flash of optimism and the transition in the discourse around telegraphy, a key moment when the telegraph was widespread enough to be important but before familiarity and disillusionment reduced interest in the technology. The 1860s were a transitional time for how society understood the telegraph. The technology had long been somewhat familiar—it was, after all, an invention of the 1830s—but in the 1860s it had only recently become a fixture of people’s lives, and still remained somewhat “underused and ill understood” (Menke 163). The technology had only recently expanded across Great Britain, rapidly increasing from a little over 2,000 miles of telegraph wires in 1850 to 80,000 in 1867, the year of the publication of *Telegraph Secrets* (Otis, “The Other End of the Wire” 190). The telegraph also attracted additional interest following the 1865 creation of the Telegraph Union, and the 1866 installation of the first successful Transatlantic cable (following the brief success and then failure of an earlier cable in 1858). The mid-century, then, was the first time that the telegraph was in widespread use, even though the technology was not yet thoroughly integrated into society, making it a particularly relevant moment to study via fiction. 1867, the publication year of *Telegraph Secrets*, is a key year because it occurs
just before government unification of the telegraph. This unification, begun in the Telegraph Acts of 1868-9, represents, according to Susan Shelangoskie, “the apex of public confidence in the new medium,” before the poor financial returns of the nationalized telegraph began to be criticized (73). It was a moment, therefore, when society seemed ready to embrace the magic nature of telegraphs without fully seeing their limitations.

Peering into the imagined inner workings of the telegraph office would have been both exciting and troubling. Whereas the timetable claims a continued relationship with human usefulness, the contradictions in the telegraph’s use of information are impossible to avoid almost as soon as the fiction asks readers to consider how their texts are transmitted. The very existence of the “telegraph story,” emphasizing the operator and machine, tends to obviously violate the information paradigm of pure and instant transmission on which the technology rests. Unlike a timetable novel, which can allow the disconnection inherent in abstract information to subtly emerge over the course of the novel, a story which features an operator immediately puts itself in an adversarial relationship with the discourse of the telegraph as unmediated flow.

Over the course of this chapter, I have traced a range of attempts, on the part of Telegraph Secrets, to reassert the concreteness of the telegram by emphasizing embodiment. The presence of the telegraph operator, the coincidences of characters appearing embodied where they should not, and the personification of codes, all accentuate the material aspects of the technology. Such embodiments are undercut,

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30 Menke even suggests that “Telegraphing secrets left and right, Hemyng’s stories might also suggest the desirability of turning the private telegraph networks into uniform, government-run public service, an effort that began in the year he published his collection” (175).
however, by their grotesque and disproportionate nature. Furthermore, the repetition of characters and plot lines turn many of the text’s details into abstract tropes, thus making them into disembodied information. Ultimately, the text represents a failure to reattach materiality to abstract information. And in fact, for all of the historical materiality of the telegraphic technology, and for all of *Telegraph Secret*’s attempts to reinforce the embodiment of information, the telegraph is often identified by information historians as being one of the key technological developments creating the new concept of information in the abstract.  

*Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Telegraph Secrets* share a similar attitude towards the information age. Both are skeptical of a reading of information which accepts the idea that content can be removed from its contexts and become abstract information. In the next two texts this project considers, the texts are equally skeptical of abstract information, but I do begin to trace a definite shift. *Telegraph Secrets* shows that the attempt to tackle the question of information in the abstract can have unexpected effects on the aesthetics of the text (in, for example, the grotesque embodiments). This makes sense—information in the abstract is an inherently “fictional” idea in the broadest sense, in that it is an imagined way to understand some part of the world. Information in the abstract is therefore an idea particularly well-adapted to fictional representation. This is the reason why high realism has proven such a productive avenue for critics to explore representations of information culture.

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31 This idea appears, for example, in James W. Carey’s *Communication as Culture*, Neil Postman’s *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, and Toni Weller and David Bawden’s “The Social and Technological Origins of the Information Society.”
Detective fiction in this period, on the other hand, does not seek to represent information culture, but to challenge the idea of information in the abstract. But even while it insists that we interrogate the uses of abstract information, detective fiction begins to be entranced by the new possibilities opened by this changing attitude towards information. The following two chapters explore texts that retain their skepticism that information in the abstract is real, but begin to find in it a site of productive aesthetic experimentation.
CHAPTER 4
WEIGHING WORDS: HYBRIDITY AND QUOTATION IN *THE MOONSTONE* AND
THE NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Introduction

Franklin Blake, one of the characters in Wilkie Collins’s 1868 novel *The Moonstone*, wants to provide a record of the events surrounding the theft of a rare Indian diamond. After much thought and consultation with the family lawyer, Blake decides that the best way to record the story will be to assemble a series of about a dozen first-person accounts of people in some way connected with the events. As Blake explains to Betteredge, the family steward, this practice of assembling direct accounts from each character will add to the accuracy of the overall account:

> We have certain events to relate… and we have certain persons concerned in those events who are capable of relating them. Starting from these plain facts, the idea is that we should all write the story of the Moonstone in turn—as far as our own personal experience extends, and no farther.”

(Collins, *The Moonstone* 21–2)

The above description turns the novel’s narrative into a series of quotations, taken out of a full imagined context and inserted into the novel. Many of the novel’s narratives are presented literally as “extracts” from longer works: the prologue is “Extracted from a Family Paper,” and the fourth narrative is “Extracted from the Journal of Ezra Jennings” (*The Moonstone* 9, 397). Even when the narratives have supposedly been solicited by Blake, they are presented as a small piece of the much larger imagined story each

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32 The narrators can be counted in different ways, but can include Gabriel Betteredge, Miss Clack, Mathew Bruff, Franklin Blake, Ezra Jennings, Sergeant Cuff, Mr Candy, Sergeant Cuff’s Man, the Captain, Mr Murthwaite, the author of the family paper, and Roseanna Spearman (via her letter).
character offers. The narrators cannot tell the full story of the Moonstone’s disappearance and recovery as they understand it, since they are limited to speaking “as far as our own personal experience extends, and no farther.” In other words, each of the narratives is presented as a quoted excerpt from one of the novel’s many imagined sources.

Blake’s conflation of the character’s narratives with the “plain facts” suggests that he is viewing these quotes as transferable, stable indicators of meaning. Indeed, Blake is so sure of the credibility of the different narratives that he suggests that they will serve as an enduring record of the true events, even after the deaths of the people directly involved. The collection in the novel will serve as “a record of the facts to which those who come after us can appeal” (The Moonstone 21). The direct quote bears empirical meaning, Blake suggests, and will be accepted as truth indefinitely.

Blake’s confidence in his method of evidence has often been equated with the novel’s overt engagement with the judicial system, which also puts its investment in the first-person accounts of its narrators. The narrators, as Ronald R. Thomas suggests, “explicitly present their case like witnesses in a trial” (“The Moonstone, Detective Fiction and Forensic Science” 65). But the novel is not simply a copy of a trial. Unlike in a trial situation, where the testimony is framed, structured, and questioned by a series of interpreters (lawyers, judges, jury) the novel’s testimony is supposed to stand on its own. It is not obviously shaped or manipulated by any interpreting figure.

Blake does not apparently question the idea that these quotes will retain their meaning unchanged when they enter the new context of the novel. The novel thus initially appears to embrace what we can now read as the perceived “decontextualized” property of abstract information that was developing in the mid-Victorian era. Such information was believed to be able to move from context to context as Nunberg’s “noble substance,” with its “content… preserved intact when its material and social supports are stripped away” (107). Such information supposedly retains its original meaning and “essence” unchanged as it passes from context to context. The novel’s quotes initially seem to be presented as just such decontextualized information—legible and retaining their truth and meaning in the new context of the novel. A piece of text, in this theory of information, does not change its meaning when excerpted from its original text and inserted as a quote into a new text.

Though the narrative seems to be based on the supposed reliability of combining quotes in the new context of the novel, the narrative itself constantly undermines this strategy. Repeatedly, the novel demonstrates that putting a quote in a new context can in fact change its meaning. We read a piece of evidence, and it bears a specific and clear interpretation to the character who is reporting it. When it is combined with the evidence of other characters, however, that evidence is rewritten. Moreover, even while the novel creates its narrative from collected and manipulated information, some characters willfully apply quotes to situations beyond their original intended purpose. The most obvious example of this is Betteredge, who repeatedly quotes lines from _Robinson Crusoe_ and suggests their immediate applicability to events in his life. If Betteredge’s
quotes take on new meanings when he applies them to new situations, so too might the rest of the novel’s quotations destabilize in their new contexts. *The Moonstone* thus challenges the supposedly rational nature of its own information structures—quotes are supposed to bring meaning, but a quote also has the potential to change meaning in a new situation.

The novel’s exploration of the process of quotation links the novel to other activities involving similar practices. From the use of the excerpt in Victorian reviewing to the new practices of scrapbooking, the Victorian quote seems to have become, as John Plotz argues, a kind of “portable property,” spreading texts across “historical, authorial, national, and, not least, generic boundaries” (4). This project focuses specifically on one of these new practices. The novel was written against the backdrop of one of the largest informational projects of the mid-Victorian era, the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Examining *The Moonstone* in the context of the debates surrounding the choice and ordering of words in the dictionary allows us access into the novel’s skepticism of decontextualized information. The new innovation of the *New English Dictionary* (as the *OED* was then called) was the inclusion of word use—quotes—to provide empirical evidence of each word’s history and function in the language. Like Blake at the opening of *The Moonstone*, the editors did not appear to question the idea that quoted information retains its original meaning out of context and thus can act as a guide to the language. Yet, of course, a quote’s meaning changes immediately upon being inserted into a dictionary. It no longer serves to indicate its original meaning, but instead only expresses
the meaning of one word it defines. The seemingly simple project stretched decades beyond its deadlines as its editors wrestled with the slipperiness of the quotation when used as a key to making meaning.

Ultimately, the novel presents a new vision of decontextualized information, in which information, removed from its original conditions of being, actually gains potency and vitality by picking up bits of new contexts. *The Moonstone*’s attitude towards society’s perception of abstract information significantly differs from the attitude of *Lady Audley’s Secret* or *Telegraph Secrets*, which both try to undermine the concept of abstract information. Instead, *The Moonstone* critiques the idea that information inevitably retains its meaning unchanged when its context changes, but celebrates the new meanings it can acquire. I trace this in the novel’s attitude towards its most effective detective characters, who have all adopted aspects of different contexts through which they have traveled, and thus are all hybridized along the lines of nationality, race, class, and even word choice. Ultimately, *The Moonstone* represents information as adulterated and strengthened, like a metal alloy, by the new meanings it takes in different contexts.

**Limits of the Decontextualized Quotation**

The novel seems to suggest that the decontextualized quotation—the text removed from its original imagined context and inserted into the novel—will not change its meaning with its new setting, allowing us to correctly recover the important parts of each of the character’s stories and to accurately understand the theft of the Moonstone. But the novel actually critiques the idea that context has no effect on information.
The narrative repeatedly shows characters attempting to use decontextualized information to bring meaning, and finding that such quotes actually lead them astray. For example, at the halfway point in *The Moonstone*, Sergeant Cuff, police detective, presents an impressive string of evidence which he has collected primarily by gathering and ordering first-person testimony. This string of evidence leads him to suspect Rachel Verinder of stealing her own diamond to pay her debts. Cuff notes that Rachel Verinder, a young woman of rank who has lost a valuable diamond, was deeply uncooperative with all efforts to recover it. She refused to allow her possessions to be searched, and drove off after being told that leaving would hinder the investigation. Of course, it would be difficult for a young lady of her status to sell the jewel, but Sergeant Cuff has a response for that as well—a housemaid, Roseanna Spearman, had once been a thief, and still had connections with a money-lender who would not ask too many questions upon receiving the gem. Roseanna, moreover, had been behaving extremely suspiciously, culminating in her suicide. From this evidence, Sergeant Cuff concludes that Rachel Verinder has stolen her own diamond. The narrative reads like the final pages of a twentieth century detective novel; Cuff’s explanation is drawn-out and convincing, clarifying many of the clues which came before. It seems that the various strands of evidence he has gathered have all added up to a clear result.

Cuff, however, is completely wrong, and his main problem seems to be that his information has been decontextualized. Cuff’s evidence is gathered from a few small narratives, taken radically out of context. Significantly, when he states his solutions to Rachel’s mother Lady Verinder, her response is that Rachel is “absolutely incapable of
doing what you suppose her to have done” (Collins, *The Moonstone* 171). While Lady Verinder freely admits that she has no greater understanding of the events or insight into her daughter’s behavior than Sergeant Cuff does, her understanding of her daughter is far deeper than Cuff’s, for it exists in a much richer context of years of understanding. The novel repeatedly pits such broad, contextualized understanding against decontextualized scraps of testimony, and shows that decontextualized information is sorely lacking in usefulness.

Significantly, Sergeant Cuff here replicates the novel’s procedures of making meaning. Like the narrative itself, supposedly composed of the scraps of its narrator’s experience only as it relates to the diamond, Cuff’s story is composed of only those scraps of Rachel’s life which seem to relate to the theft of the diamond. But actually, her actions look very different within a fuller context of her story. Her suspicious activities are all due to her belief that Franklin Blake stole the stone and her desire to protect him, and do not reflect the obvious interpretation.

We find an even more extreme example of this critique of decontextualized information later in the narrative. The case seems to hinge on the owner of a missing nightgown, which was soiled on Rachel’s newly-painted door during the night of the crime. Franklin Blake painstakingly hunts down the clues, and during his first-person narrative, he discovers the nightgown. He sees, to his astonishment, that it is his own, marked with his own name, though he has no conscious memory of stealing the diamond.

Again, the novel contrasts decontextualized testimony—Blake’s name on the nightgown—with a richer contextual understanding of his character. Blake himself
initially seems ready to credit the decontextualized information over his own contextually informed understanding of himself: “…there is the witness against me! The paint on the nightgown, and the name on the nightgown are facts” (Collins, The Moonstone 316). The way he calls the nightgown a “witness” is particularly telling, linking the physical object to one of the novel’s first-person narrators. Shortly thereafter, he encounters an even more damaging first-person testimony against him, in the form of Roseanna’s letter, which corroborates the evidence of the nightgown. Roseanna speaks of finding the nightgown among Franklin Blake’s possessions, seeming to reinforce the credibility of the decontextualized piece of information.

Ultimately, though, the only way for Blake to solve the mystery is to believe in the broader context of his own knowledge of himself, even though it initially seems to contradict Roseanna’s evidence. Betteredge, pointing to the nightgown, declares that “he’s a liar,” and urges Blake to “take a drop more grog… and you’ll get over the weakness of believing in facts!” (The Moonstone 316). When a piece of decontextualized evidence comes up against a broader context, the suggestion is, it is the evidence, and not the context, which must be reexamined. As the mystery continues to unfold, Blake is able to reconcile the damaging, decontextualized information of the nightgown and Roseanna’s letter with a broader, more reconcilable understanding of the night’s events.

The novel criticizes the limitations of decontextualized quotations in these examples, and it does so at a time when decontextualized quotations were being hailed as the key to the development of the English language. While dictionaries and the study of Philology had, of course, existed for some time, we see a shift in emphasis and self-
consciousness in the middle of the century. The Philological Society of London was formed in 1842, and met for the first time on November 25, with 203 members attending, “for the investigation of the Structure, the Affinities and the History of Languages; and the Philological Illustration of the Classical Writers of Greece and Rome” (London Philological Society 1). The formation of this society is seen as a landmark moment for scholars of the history of language study.  

Most significantly, the mid-Victorian period saw the beginning of the practice in Britain of using quotations in dictionaries, a practice which necessarily changed the ways in which society conceived of quotations. Up to that date, there were a few common dictionaries in use, including the outdated eighteenth-century dictionary by Samuel Johnson which contained Johnson’s own opinions on which words were best, and a more scholarly but less comprehensive early nineteenth-century dictionary from Charles Richardson, a schoolteacher. Britain was far behind the rest of Europe in its dictionaries, even “strikingly anachronistic” compared to the advances of other countries (Mugglestone, Lost 5). The Grimm brothers had started work on the German *Deutsches Wörterbuch* in 1840 and published the first section in 1852, while in France, Émile Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la langue française* was likewise partially completed (Mugglestone, Lost 5). Both of these dictionaries included direct evidence of word usage.

The Philological Society planned a new British dictionary which would likewise rest on quotes, pulled out of context and put into the dictionary to illustrate word usage.  

In 1857, Richard Trench gave a speech before the Philological Society which would

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34 For Hans Aarsleff, for example, the meeting “marked the beginning of a new stage in the history of language study in England” and reformed the way in which the study of the language was thought of in society (212).
eventually lead to the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (originally called the *New English Dictionary*). Trench’s speech, which was quickly published and disseminated, specifically addressed the deficiencies of earlier dictionaries, which were often idiosyncratic and prescriptive about which words should and should not be used. Instead, Trench and his followers sought, as Linda Mugglestone explains, to reframe the question of language scientifically and “preclude the subjective engagement with data which had marked previous work” (7). As Trench writes:

> The business which he [i.e., the creator of a dictionary] has undertaken is to collect and arrange all the words, whether good or bad, whether they commend themselves to his judgment or otherwise, which... those writing in the language have employed. He is an historian of it, not a critic. (*On Some Deficiencies* 4)

Trench thus adopts a scientific, empirical stance, setting his views against more subjective or intuitive versions of meaning-making. In order to be scientific, it was necessary to begin by assembling evidence of a word’s use.

As in *The Moonstone*, quotations were seen as the best way to present empirical, unassailable evidence. Trench writes that “Our Dictionaries might note more accurately than they do, and illustrate by suitable quotations, the earlier uses which words have now left behind them, the successive modifications of meaning through which they have passed” (*On Some Deficiencies* 34). Such a dictionary makes meaning through quotations—examples of word use will give more comprehensive, detailed meaning. It is not necessary to read a whole book to get a sense of what one word means. It is not even

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35 Penny Silva calls the methodology “a framework ideally suited to Victorian scholarship, with its Darwinian world view and its commitment to ‘scientific’ methodology,” suggesting that the dictionary rests on a theory of language based on a rational method by which scientific, impersonal observation leads to the determination of word meaning (79).
necessary to know in advance how a word is or was usually used, because the evidence of
the quotation is enough. Information is supposedly capable of being transferrable to
different contexts while retaining its essence unchanged.

Because of the daunting nature of the task, quotes of word usage were collected
through what we might today call “crowdsourcing,” a procedure similar to the imagined
creation of The Moonstone’s narrative. Volunteers looked through books and sent in
quotes as examples of a word’s use. Trench gave his speech in 1857, and by the end of
the year, Trench had already enlisted the help of 76 volunteers to read 121
books (Mugglestone, Lost 8). By 1859, the “Proposal for the Publication of a New
English Dictionary by the Philological Society” could state that “upwards of 100
collectors have voluntarily given their services, and more than 160 works and parts of
works have been submitted to examination upon a uniform system” (Trench, On Some
Deficiencies 1).

The editors often struggled with the massive difficulty of the task of collecting,
verifying, and ordering the sources, but the overall premise—that meaning is sustained
unchanged when a quote is pulled from its original text and put in the dictionary—does
not seem to have been questioned. Actually, of course, a quote changes in meaning and
purpose the moment it enters the dictionary, even if the words are retained unaltered from
the original text. Rather than saying whatever their original meaning was, a quote
necessarily shifts into a new purpose, the definition of a word.

In The Moonstone, bits of decontextualized information are shown to have less
relevance than a richer contextualized understanding of a character. A similar
disconnection was encountered by the creators of the dictionary. Their supposedly “empirical” dictionary actually partially rested on their own deeper, contextualized understanding of word meaning. Even within the context of his speech, Trench notes that certain words should be excluded from the dictionary because they are not really part of the working language. In other words, he makes a prescriptive judgment about word inclusion based on his deeper contextualized understanding of language, something which many of the OED’s editors would do as well. After claiming that he is a “historian” and not a “critic,” Trench proceeds to criticize several different categories of language when he outlines “the proper bounds and limits of a Dictionary…” (On Some Deficiencies 50). Foreign words should be excluded, for “the fault may be as great of carelessly taking in foreign and extraneous matter, as of unduly rejecting that which properly belongs to it” (On Some Deficiencies 4). Trench also warns against including “purely technical words,” claiming that such terms are not “words at all, but signs; having been deliberately invented as the nomenclature, and… the algebraic notation of some special art or science, and having never passed the threshold of this, nor mingled with the general family of words” (On Some Deficiencies 46). We must “everywhere preserve the line firm and distinct,” Trench warns, between a dictionary and an encyclopedia: “Let the quotations yield as much information as they can be made to yield, in subordination to their primary purpose, which is, to illustrate the word, and not to tell us about the thing” (On Some Deficiencies 49).36

36 Trench’s principle of objectivity was perhaps unsustainable in the face of the breadth and slipperiness of the English language. If the dictionary is a project which seeks to lock down the evolution of meaning, what it ultimately shows is the impossibility of fully fixing a definition in time. Historians of the dictionary-creation project usually stress the difficulty which the English language creates in regards to
The quote suddenly bore a new weight of proving a word’s meaning, instead of being pulled without alteration in its meaning in the original source. Inevitably, the ideal of objectivity gave way before a broader and not immediately definable understanding of which words were part of the language. Rather than fully portraying the breadth of the language, as Charlotte Brewer notes, the *OED* involved inevitable processes of selection, both in the list of texts which were distributed as likely and appropriate sources for finding words, and in the various choices of words and quotes from these sources (41).

This difficulty in sustaining a purely descriptive methodology points us to the central problem in the creation of this new “scientific” dictionary. Supposedly, Trench suggests, we are able to throw out all prior understandings of the language, discarding the previous dictionaries, to build up an objective understanding of the language through examples of its use. But of course, on a practical level it was very difficult for the dictionary’s creators to achieve this level of objectivity.

Perhaps this is the reason why, after an initial burst of interest, the dictionary-creation project soon slowed to a crawl. The dictionary turned out to take considerably longer than the original estimates, with official work stretching from the 1860s to the 1920s. In the late 1860s, when *The Moonstone* was being written, dictionary work had slowed radically, and the editor in the early 1870s bemoaned the lack of significant progress to report (Mugglestone, *Lost* 11). It was difficult to find examples of words and to verify them. Readers were even encouraged to physically cut out passages from books such a project. Mugglestone argues that “the indeterminacy of the vocabulary (the ‘nebulous mass’ described by Murray in his celebrated ‘General Explanations’) of course remains the major theoretical problem with which the lexicographer is faced,” while Winchester notes “English language’s capacity for foxy and relentlessly slippery flexibility” (Mugglestone, “‘Pioneers’” 8, Winchester 29). Because the language is so unstable, the ideals of a purely descriptive dictionary are practically impossible.
and send them in, to make them easier to verify. But even this did not resolve the
problem of decontextualized information, for “the linguistic record of earlier eras of the
language was fallible, depending on texts which had been imperfectly edited, and on
readings which were in many cases unsubstantiated” (Mugglestone, *Lost* 10). Even as the
*OED* collected quotes, the meaning of a quote in a new context eroded, a contradiction
which *The Moonstone* exploits.

Wandering Quotations

*The Moonstone* adds to its critique of decontextualized information in its comic
portrayal of wandering quotes, which take on obviously different meanings out of
context. The heavy-handed use of quotes by Gabriel Betteredge and Miss Clack, in
particular, undermine the novel’s whole project of making meaning with a series of
quoted testimonies.

We can rest our meaning-making on quotations, the novel initially seems to
suggest, because their content is accurate and unaffected by changes in context. Franklin
Blake even emphasizes the fact that he does not even change the manuscripts he collects
by a single line. In a footnote to Miss Clack’s manuscript, Blake writes:

> Nothing will be added, altered, or removed, in her manuscript, or in any of
> the other manuscripts which pass through my hands. Whatever opinions
> any of the writers may express, whatever peculiarities of treatment may
> mark, and perhaps in a literary sense, disfigure, the narratives which I am
> now collecting, not a line will be tampered with anywhere, from first to
> last. As genuine documents they are sent to me—and as genuine
> documents I shall preserve them; endorsed by the attestations of witnesses
> who can speak to the facts. (Collins, *The Moonstone* 202)
The entire novel’s meaning, this passage suggests, rests on these quotations, and their meaning can be relied upon implicitly. Blake apparently does not question the idea that these narratives might take on different meanings in the new context of collected testimony which might interfere with their ability to “speak to the facts.”

But even within this footnote, decontextualized information begins to take on new meaning, even though not a line has been tampered with. Franklin Blake, who was insulted by Miss Clack in her narrative, notes in the footnote that her narrative has “unquestionable value as an instrument for the exhibition of Miss Clack’s character” (Collins, *The Moonstone* 202). Blake here, even as he imagines information as decontextualized, notes that it takes on a different meaning in this new context—it becomes a display of Miss Clack’s character, though that would certainly not be her intent. Furthermore, his footnote itself is an example of the new meaning the text acquires in its journey from Miss Clack’s pen to the narrative of *The Moonstone*.

Even within the apparently stable narratives of the different characters, which are supposed to be the key to factual representation, we are constantly reminded that there are other, competing ways in which the story could be told. References to the exclusionary and subjective processes of ordering the narrative undermine the reliability of the supposedly objective, empirical testimony which each character provides. Betteredge, for example, warns his readers that certain facts will or will not prove to be eventually important. In reference to a future conversation with Franklin Blake, Betteredge states:
What was said between us, when I did ask him, later on that same day, you will find set out fully in its proper place. But as I don’t wish to raise your expectations and then disappoint them, I will take leave to warn you here—before we go any further—that you won’t find the ghost of a joke in our conversation on the subject of the jugglers. (Collins, *The Moonstone* 32–3)

The novel, through its polyvocal structure, imagines dozens of novels, each narrated by one character telling his or her story. Such moments as this one commenting on the narrative’s order are reminders that *The Moonstone* is composed of limited, decontextualized pieces of these longer imagined stories. Similarly, Betteredge at other points makes reference to things you will see “when we have gone on together a little longer,” or when he laments that he could not at the time look a little way into the future (*The Moonstone* 59, 70). He is also equally quick to inform the reader that “you needn’t feel particularly interested” about minor characters he introduces (*The Moonstone* 76). Again and again, the novel reminds us that decontextualized pieces of information are not the same as the whole story.

While Betteredge is probably the character who comments most on the process, both opening the novel and appearing near its close, other characters also make similar gestures to the other possible orderings of the novel. Mr. Bruff notes that parts of his narrative have “already been put tidily in their proper places, by that exemplary person, Miss Clack” (Collins, *The Moonstone* 282). He also comments about putting things in place when he notes that “The little that I have to tell is (as I think I have already said) of some importance, nevertheless, in respect of its bearing very remarkably on events which are still to come” (*The Moonstone* 282). Like Trench, Bruff even edits at times, deciding, for example, that Mr. Luker is not worthy of direct quotation:
Mr Luker was, in every respect, such an inferior creature to the Indian—he was so vulgar, so ugly, so cringing, and so prosy—that he is quite unworthy of being reported, at any length, in these pages. The substance of what he had to tell me may be fairly stated as follows…” (The Moonstone 285)

This moment is all the more anomalous because it emphasizes the fictional premise impossible in real life—that the other voices in the novel have been fully remembered and faithfully embodied by those who remember them.

The narrative, then, tries to simultaneously represent quotes as being unchanged by their conditions of ordering, even while several characters comment on the ways the narratives have been changed by the process of assembling them into one story. The main narratives are further undermined by free-floating quotes, which show even more extremely how removing content from context can change its nature.

Betteredge frequently quotes from Robinson Crusoe, as in the example which opens this chapter. He shows very little interest in the plot or individual characters of Robinson Crusoe, as is demonstrated by his immediate ability to relate months of building a boat to his few hours of writing. Instead, Betteredge finds most significance in the quote, a disconnected scrap of meaning. As Katie Lanning notes, Betteredge’s use of Robinson Crusoe “is curiously unusual: every time he introduces a direct quote, he gives a specific page number” (2). While Lanning convincingly connects this phenomenon to Betteredge’s consciousness of the book as a market commodity, the way in which these quotations are used also makes it productive to view through the lens of dictionary writing.
Betteredge’s quotations, in fact, are always carefully cited like a dictionary quote, even while he draws them dramatically out of context:

“As I live by bread, sir, here’s the bit I was reading, the moment before you came in! Page one hundred and fifty-six as follows:—‘I stood like one Thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an Apparition.’ If that isn’t as much as to say, ‘Expect the sudden appearance of Mr Franklin Blake’—there’s no meaning in the English language!” said Betteredge, closing the book with a bang… (Collins, The Moonstone 301)

Betteredge’s blind faith in Robinson Crusoe is usually played for comic effect, as it is here, and yet we can read a tension in Betteredge’s comment that if this doesn’t hold true, “there’s no meaning in the English language.” The official meaning of the English language at this time was actually being formalized through such quotations such as this one, and The Moonstone’s narration is also being formed through a process of extended quotation. Yet here, the quote is radically disconnected from its original meaning, as a quote from an eighteenth-century novel is read as clearly referring to a nineteenth-century character in a different novel.

Within the new context, the quotes gain new and unexpected meanings. For Betteredge, these are spiritual. As several critics have noted, Betteredge reads his favorite novel non-sequentially or discontinuously, a reading form more commonly associated with the Bible. Lanning compares Betteredge’s reading practices to Peter Stallybrass’s descriptions of reading the Bible, which has many subdivisions to better enable different types of reading. The Bible “could be read discontinuously or indexically” (Lanning 8). Lanning also notes that in Betteredge’s type of reading, “the reader actively shapes meaning by choosing which passages to read, in what order, and how to connect those passages to each other” (8). In other words, rather than sustaining their meaning, the
quotes take on even more, proliferating meanings as Betteredge applies them to new situations.

Quotations out of context can also be downright destructive. Lady Verinder is ill and has been warned by her doctor not to read anything too strenuous. Miss Clack’s purposeful distribution of quotes in places where they do not belong—such as in Lady Verinder’s house—can be read as an act of near-cruelty against her dying relative. Miss Clack describes her quotation and decontextualization as follows:

Preparation by books had failed, owing to the doctor’s infidel obstinacy. So be it! What was the next thing to try? The next thing to try was—Preparation by Little Notes. In other words, the books themselves having been sent back, select extracts from the books, copied by different hands, and all addressed as letters to my aunt, were, some to be sent by post, and some to be distributed about the house on the plan I had adopted on the previous day. As letters they would excite no suspicion; as letters they would be opened—and, once opened, might be read. Some of them I wrote myself. “Dear aunt, may I ask your attention to a few lines?” &c. “Dear aunt, I was reading last night, and I chanced on the following passage,” &c. Other letters were written for me by my valued fellow-workers, the sisterhood at the Mothers’-Small-Clothes… Using these and other similar forms of courteous appeal, we reintroduced all my precious passages under a form which not even the doctor’s watchful materialism could suspect. Before the shades of evening had closed around us, I had a dozen awakening letters for my aunt, instead of a dozen awakening books. (Collins, The Moonstone 236–7)

We see again the portability of quotes, which will, the suggestion is, sustain their meaning unchanged, even in the absence of the full text. Miss Clack does not need “a dozen awakening books,” but only “a dozen awakening letters.” Like the real dictionary entries, texts are mined for meaning not just by an individual but through crowd sourcing. The passage is a reiteration of the structure of both the novel and the dictionary, both of which pull together quotes and order them.
Here, though, the process appears unduly aggressive. Mrs. Clack conceals the letters around the house, apparently with the intention of surprising her dying relative into reading something which might be harmful to her. Quotations, in her hands, become a tool to express her spite against the Verinder family. In a new context, the quotes acquire new meaning.

Decontextualized Detectives

Up until now, I have traced the ways in which the novel critiques the idea of abstract information. Specifically, I have noted the novel’s skepticism of the idea that quoted information can be decontextualized and moved freely from one place to another without changing its meaning. The novel repeatedly points out that changing a quote’s context can in fact change its meaning, an argument which threatens to undermine the novel’s whole narrative structure.

But significantly, the novel’s solution to this problem is not to leave information in its original context. Instead, the novel begins to celebrate the ways in which information picks up new meanings in different situations. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, running an investigation based on abstract information is a problem and leads to contaminated results. In *Telegraph Secrets*, abstract information is a problem to be solved by reasserting the non-abstract nature of the information technology. But in *The Moonstone*, information’s supposed ability to be moved to a new context enables a whole range of narrative possibilities.
While a wandering piece of information in *The Moonstone* does not retain its original unadulterated meaning, it does become useful or interesting as it takes on new and changing features in new situations. This vision of abstract information in a new context is not the same as the concept of “decontextualized information.” Information ceases to be the “noble substance,” “indifferent to the transformation of its vehicles,” as Nunberg states (107). Instead, information (words, quotes, ideas) can travel, but collects new meaning in different contexts. What we have here is a new, compromise vision of abstract information culture, in which information may change in different contexts and still be useful.

The ability of decontextualized information’s ability to become stronger by acquiring additional meaning in different contexts was particularly significant in this period because of contemporaneous debates over the “purity” of the English language. These debates pitted criticism of the English language’s supposed adulteration by Latinate tongues against a discourse which argued that absorbing different linguistic heritages gave English its force and potency. The dictionary, with its emphasis on inclusion and word origin, comes down on the latter side of that debate.

This vision of information collecting new and helpful contexts is most evident when we look beyond the novel’s use of quotes to the way it treats other textual features. Even while the novel seems to critique the way in which quotes wander in different locations, taking on new meanings, it celebrates the ways in which *characters* take on new identities in different locations. The novel’s most effective detective figures are, by most counts, Franklin Blake, Ezra Jennings, and, to a lesser extent, Sergeant Cuff. While
all of these characters are invested in clearing up ambiguity and solving the crime, they themselves are all ambiguous characters. Specifically, they are all wanderers, whose identities take on characteristics of the different contexts through which they travel. Like the quotes which change meaning in a new situation, these characters are reimagined in new locations. But rather than being a liability, these characters are shown to be the best detectives and most skillful adapters to different people and ideas.

Franklin Blake has traveled through Europe, and as he travels, he takes on aspects of the different nationalities through which he has traveled, representing the most dramatic example of the ways in which context can change meaning. This initially appears to be a problem in the novel, but it gradually gives way to an impression of his usefulness, and his ability to absorb or borrow from other contexts goes along with his ability to solve the crime.

As a character he appears curiously unfixed, changing his personality based on his mood, and sliding into German philosophical discourse or light-hearted French witticisms in rapid succession. As Betteredge represents him:

At the age when we are all of us most apt to take our colouring, in the form of a reflection from the colouring of other people, he had been sent abroad, and had been passed on from one nation to another, before there was time for any one colouring more than another to settle itself on him firmly. As a consequence of this, he had come back with so many different sides to his character, all more or less jarring with each other, that he seemed to pass his life in a state of perpetual contradiction with himself” (Collins, *The Moonstone* 55).

Blake here is less a person than a mirror of other people, capable of endlessly changing form, but lacking any real traits uniquely his own. The ambiguity in Blake’s character is initially presented as problematic in the novel—while Rachel’s family and friends believe
her to be honest despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, both Rachel Verinder and Roseanna Spearman find it perfectly conceivable that Blake would have stolen the diamond.

Franklin Blake’s character is a “modern cosmopolitan mélange of European identities” whose name, according to Ian Duncan, “hints at a blackening of the traditional social type of Anglo-Saxon independence” (308). Betteredge notes that Blake borrowed money from him which was never paid back, and goes on to class Blake as a “borrower” of nationalities as well: “After he had learnt what the institutions of Germany could teach him, he gave the French a turn next, and the Italians a turn after that” (Collins, *The Moonstone* 29). Blake’s racially-charged fluidity comes to a head when, as the first-person narrator, he reads his own name on the stained nightgown and states that, “…On the unanswerable evidence of the paint-stain, I had discovered Myself as the Thief” (*The Moonstone* 314). In this moment, Blake literally appears separate from his own consciousness, so fluid that he is capable of being not just the French wit or the German philosopher, but also the English detective and the mysterious thief.

Yet despite Blake’s inconsistencies, he is ultimately shown to be an effective and versatile reader of events, a detective figure capable of revising his opinions until he finds the truth. If Blake’s hybridity is initially read as a negative, he ultimately becomes both the novel’s closest approach to a hero and to an author figure. As a detective, he

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Duncan, who can find the words both “veranda” and “very Indian” in “Verinder,” seems to be implying the purity of “Franklin,” the medieval British word for “freeman,” and contrasting this with the “black” implied in Blake. Such interpretations are not necessarily always convincing ones; we might make an opposing argument for the “Frenchness” of the “Franklin,” and the whiteness or paleness of “Blake,” an old English word meaning “pale, pallid, wan…” (“Blake, Adj.”). Interpretive onomastics is perhaps always a questionable means of analysis; in any case, however, the name brings enough ambiguities to reinforce my point that Blake is not a purely “Saxon” type.
successfully clears first Rachel and then himself. As one of the narrative’s most extended authors, he shows himself as the main force leading to the mystery eventually being solved. As the editor of the collection of the texts that makes up the narrative of *The Moonstone*, it is Blake’s ability to encompass and graft different voices into a coherent whole which creates the novel’s powerful mixed narration. The unconsciousness nature of his guilt is established and he is awarded with a wife and a child on the way.

Ezra Jennings is another character who bears traces of his different contexts. His father was a white European and his mother was Indian, and his mixed race is reflected in his dramatically contrasting black and white hair—an unusually tangible representation of the ways he has been touched by different social contexts. Jennings, like Blake, has traveled. Born in the colonies, and brought up there for some time, he has now been transplanted to England, where society concludes, as Blake does, that “…there was the mixture of some foreign race in his English blood” (371).

Like Blake, Jennings’s foreign traces initially seem to be a liability. Betteredge, the proper English servant, distrusts him, and the town seems to have an outright aversion to him. Just as Franklin Blake is often read as weak, Jennings is not as “vital” as the pure Saxon stock. He is wasted by disease and far weaker than, say, the quintessentially English Betteredge. He is also marked by an opium habit, another and less fortunate trace from the East.

Ultimately, though, Jennings is represented as a good and even heroic character, a formidable detective and a character with a particularly apt understanding of narrative. The novel privileges the hybridity that allows such characters more flexibility in mind
and more willingness to look beyond the obvious, even if this hybridity pulls them away from the traditional English stock. Jennings performs one of the most overt and significant acts leading to the solution of the mystery: the recreation, through his disconnected, delirious speech, of Mr. Candy’s ideas. In this device, a favorite of Collins (who used a similar contrivance in *The Law and the Lady*), Jennings must literally fill in the gaps left by missing speech caused by madness, a role which requires him to step almost into another man’s mind to interpret the clues:

> At odds and ends of time… I reproduced my shorthand notes, in the ordinary form of writing—leaving large spaces between the broken phrases, and even the single words, as they had fallen disconnectedly from Mr Candy’s lips. I then treated the result thus obtained, on something like the principle which one adopts in putting together a child’s “puzzle”. It is all confusion to begin with; but it may be all brought into order and shape, if you can only find the right way. Acting on this plan, I filled in each blank space on the paper, with what the words or phrases on either side of it suggested to me as the speaker’s meaning; altering over and over again, until my additions followed naturally on the spoken words which came before them, and fitted naturally into the spoken words which came after them. (Collins, *The Moonstone* 374–5)

Jennings’s act demonstrates the benefits of information which can take on different meaning in different contexts. Ezra Jennings is able to actively step into another man’s voice and recreate the missing words. This transformative moment, which sets the novel’s characters for the first time on the right path towards the real criminal, is shown to only be possible through the ability of its characters to absorb new contexts.

Just as Blake is able to slide into different discourses to adopt a more “French” or “German” style, Jennings demonstrates great acuity in his ability to switch discourses as needed. Jennings, for example, translates the polite language of Mrs. Merridew’s objections to him into “plain English”: 
Translated from polite commonplace, into plain English, the meaning of this is, as I take it, that Mrs Merridew stands in mortal fear of the opinion of the world... I won’t disappoint Miss Verinder; and I won’t delay a reconciliation between two young people who love each other, and who have been parted too long already. Translated from plain English into polite commonplace, this means that Mr Jennings presents his compliments to Mrs Merridew, and regrets that he cannot feel justified in interfering any farther in the matter. (Collins, *The Moonstone* 406)

Jennings here translates Mrs. Merridew’s fear of the experiment he wishes to try on Blake from “polite language” to “plain English,” demonstrating a formidable ability to switch between multiple tongues.

Cuff is also worth mentioning here, though this professional detective’s contribution is somewhat minimized compared to the work of Jennings and Blake. He is a less racially or nationally ambiguous figure, but he does possess the detective’s ability to migrate freely between different classes. He seems equally comfortable talking to Mrs. Yolland, Betteredge, and Lady Verinder, and switches quickly between talking about the crime and talking about roses, showcasing his ability to negotiate different discourses. Like Jennings and Blake, Cuff’s hybridity initially seems like a liability. His ability to read and interact with people on every level of discourse does not lead him to the correct solution in his initial investigation of the disappearance of the diamond, and he is sent away unable even to investigate his own claim. In the interim between his first appearance and final one, however, he seems to take on additional hybridity in his character. He becomes less strongly associated with a single career, retiring and growing roses—itself an activity associated with hybridity and the mixing of genetic traits. When he returns, he has gained the ability to correctly predict the real culprit.
The way in which these characters pick up traces of different identities bears many similarities with a broader social debate about the purity of the English language. The main point of contention in this debate was the question of whether the English language was made stronger by retaining a “purer” Saxon form, or by absorbing words from other languages. The mid-century interest in this debate reflects the fact that it is part of the new concept of decontextualized information—does information out of context retain its meaning unadulterated, or can it gain value from the way it absorbs new meanings in different contexts?

The *New English Dictionary* sought to be a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, collection of words. It thus aligns itself with the debate which supports the inclusion of foreign influence into the language. This reading tends to see English’s strength growing from its adulteration by different languages. The dictionary seeks to include words from a wide variety of linguistic categories, including, inevitably, a high percentage of Latinate words. Indeed, in the emphasis on word etymology and history, the dictionary’s specific details tend only to emphasize the importance of hybridity in language. Despite a few naysayers—Trench, for example, wished to exclude technical jargon and words still easily identified as being from other languages—contemporary philologists saw the ability of English to encompass different languages as a definite advantage. George Carless Swayne notes in his 1862 “Characteristics of Language” that English has “this great advantage over its more symmetrical High German sister, that when it wished to vary an idea, or describe the species of a genius, it is not obliged to make a compound from a single source, but can vary a Saxon word with a Latin or French, a Welsh or a
Greek” (368). In accounts like these, it is hybridity itself which becomes a definite and obvious advantage. Swayne also argues:

We believe it is Grimm who gives the preference to the English among modern languages, because, like the Duke of Wellington’s army in Spain, it can go anywhere and do anything. There is no purpose to which it cannot turn its hand. Like the German, it is good for poetry; like the French, it is good for prose; if the words are well picked and chosen, as by Burns and Moore, it is even good for song. Of all the modern languages, it is probably the most hardy, because it clips its words close to the root, and can live and thrive in all climates. When mixed with other tongues—as French in Canada and French and German in the United States—it has a knack of superseding them. And yet it is a language in which the original structural beauty has been sacrificed more than perhaps any other. It is a thoroughly unprincipled language; not in the sense that the French say “perfide Albion,” but in having no fixed principles of grammar. It is not a dainty feeder, but derives words and phrases from all sources, and digests them into its own body, only requiring that they should be available for expressing its meanings. (368)

While English appears to be a bit monstrous at the end of the passage, and definitely loses something in elegance, the ability to “digest” different languages makes it stronger than others, more vital, and much more versatile. “Thoroughly unprincipled,” it is a language built for use rather than beauty, and thus appears, in this passage, to be actually alive. Again and again, we see this emphasis on the fact that English is not “fixed” or set, but is more distinctly a living language, which interacts with a variety of languages in a way which sacrifices purity but gains potency.

In adopting this stance in support of hybridity, the dictionary project was working against a powerful, racially-charged discourse of style. Words with a Saxon derivation were often seen as stronger, more potent, and more effective stylistically, compared to Latinate “borrowed” words. Despite the xenophobia which underlies theories of Saxon linguistic superiority, such ideas were surprisingly common. Several Victorian writers
embraced the idea, including Dickens, Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, who all “touted the notion of the Teutonically inspired Old English as being the purest form of English ever written and spoken” (Winchester 6).38 Herbert Spencer, meanwhile, dedicated some considerable time in his 1852 “The Philosophy of Style” to the strength of Saxon as opposed to Latinate words. Spencer begins from the idea that it is an “established precept…” that Saxon words are stylistically superior, and sets out very logically to explain why this would be (436). For Spencer, seeking a scientific explanation of style came down to the problem of attention: “Regarding language as an apparatus of symbols for the conveyance of thought, we may say that, as in a mechanical apparatus, the more simple and the better arranged its parts, the greater will be the effect produced” (436-7). A child’s vocabulary, Spencer writes, is “almost wholly Saxon,” and therefore, even after complex words are learned for the same meaning, these synonyms which he later learns never become “so closely, so organically connected with the ideas signified, as do these original words used in childhood; and hence the association remains

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38 The most extreme example of this stylistic preference is William Barnes, who “proposes a simple program by which foreign words might be replaced by an innovative use of Saxon ones” (Camlot 496). He opens his An Outline of English Speech-Craft with the following Saxonized preface:

FORE-SAY.

This little book was not written to win prize or praise; but it is put forth as one small trial, weak though it may be, towards the upholding of our own strong old Anglo-Saxon speech, and the ready teaching of it to purely English minds by their own tongue.

Speech was shapen of the breath-sounds of speakers, for the ears of hearers, and not from speech-tokens (letters) in books, for men’s eyes, though it is a great happiness that the words of man can be long holden and given oer to sight; and therefore I have shapen my teaching as that of a speech of breath-sounded words, and not of lettered ones; and though I have, of course, given my thoughts in a book, for those whom my voice cannot reach, I believe that the teaching matter of it may all be put forth to a learner’s mind, and readily understood by him, without book or letters. (iii)
less powerful” (437-8). Latinate words are less organically connected to the meaning, require more attention, and therefore are stylistically weaker.39

In celebrating the usefulness of its racially and nationally-hybridized characters, *The Moonstone* points to the value of moving between contexts and taking on characteristics of all of them. Its main detective characters bear the traces of different contexts, which initially make them appear weaker or less consistent. These characters are shown to be useful in their readings of information, just as the dictionary was ultimately shown to be useful for its inclusion of both Latinate and Saxon words. And this hybridity extends even to a linguistic level, as I demonstrate in the following section.

Hybrid Quotes

The detective characters, like the English language itself, are more useful because they have taken on traces of their different contexts. This demonstrates *The Moonstone*’s new vision of decontextualized information. The way Franklin Blake and the other detective figures take on new meaning in different contexts places them in opposition to a social ideal of information retaining its meaning unchanged as it passes through different contexts. Their success in solving the mystery validates a new vision of decontextualization—in this vision, circulating people take on traces of their new

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39 He also traces this in terms of Saxon’s brevity:

The further superiority possessed in Saxon English in its comparative brevity obviously comes under the same generalization. If it be an advantage to express an idea in the smallest number of words, then will it be an advantage to express it in the smallest number of syllables. If circuitous phrases and needless expletives distract the attention and diminish the strength of the impression produced, then do surplus articulations do so. A certain effort, though commonly an inappreciable one, must be required to recognise every vowel and consonant… Hence, the shortness of Saxon words becomes a reason for their greater force, as involving a saving of the articulations to be received. (Spencer 438)
contexts which actually strengthens their usefulness. This property aligns the characters in *The Moonstone* with the debates over the English language.

This section extends that property of “hybridity” deeper, to the quotes the characters say. The language the hybridized detective characters speak is also the most linguistically mixed along the Latin/Saxon divide. Looking at the word origins of the words different characters use, therefore, allows us to see that the novel makes an argument for hybridized, adulterated language as being strong and useful. This further reinforces the novel’s argument that decontextualized information actually gains potency and vitality by picking up bits of new contexts. The best detectives literally speak in language which shows the influence of different contexts.

For a simple analysis of the percentage of Latinate vs. Germanic words, I used a textual analysis tool called the Macro-Etymological Analyzer, created by John Reeve.\(^\text{40}\) According to Reeve, the program “accepts as input a user-uploaded text file, and looks up each word in Gerard de Melo’s Etymological Wordnet database,” upon which “words are counted by language of origin using two generations of language ancestry, and then categorized by language family” (Reeve 1). Reeve suggests that “the etymology of words in a text… may be suggestive of its context or its level of discourse,” noting that Latinate terms might suggest “scientific context or a high level of discursive formality” compared to an Anglo-Saxon term (1). Looking at the Brown Corpus, a collection of digitized American texts from the 1960s, he finds a recognizable difference in genres, with scholarly and government texts showing a high proportion of Latinate words, while popular genres such as romances and adventures show the lowest (1). While Reeve does

\(^{40}\) Anglo-Saxon and “Germanic” are used interchangeably in this essay.
not consider *The Moonstone*, he does a somewhat similar experiment with the different characters in Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, concluding that “the two university-educated characters, Bernard and Neville, show the highest proportions of Latinate words, while the housewife Susan shows the lowest” (2).

When I examined *The Moonstone*’s voices in terms of linguistic derivation, I found a great deal of variation in the percentages of words used, as can be seen in figure 9. In order to examine more fully what sorts of words each character uses, this data reflects each character’s narration from their own section and their dialogue from the entire novel, but not dialogue spoken by other characters within their sections. So, for example, the file of Betteredge’s narration included everything in his section purged of all dialogue spoken by anyone else, to which I added all dialogue spoken by him in other sections such as those narrated by Franklin Blake, etc.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Arranging the data in this way, rather than performing the easier task of simply analyzing the entire section, rests on the assumption earlier discussed, that characters accurately represent each other’s language. In other words, when we read Betteredge’s report of Murthwaite’s words, we believe that is not presented as mere hearsay from a somewhat uneducated and unreliable narrator, but we seem to be actually getting his words, and his later written style does not surprise us. The irony many critics have read in Miss Clack’s sections, similarly, relies on the assumption that Miss Clack and her readers are listening to the same dialogue. This method, then, remains true to the spirit of the novel.
This method is admittedly imprecise, but it can give us a rough picture of the different sorts of discourses at work in the novel and again reveal how the formal structures of the language recapitulate the content. The most skillful readers of the detective plot, I have argued, are Blake, Jennings, and Cuff. Less distinct than the Germanic Betteredge and the Latinate Bruff, they speak in the most hybridized discourse. Their hybridity, which enables them to freely switch their forms, initially seems to be a liability, but is later rewritten as beneficial when they solve the crime.

This chart also gives us a visualization of the ways in which the narrative as a whole is able to balance very different voices. If we look at the percentage of Latinate words chart, many of the revelations will not particularly surprise us. Bruff, the lawyer, is at the high end of the percentage of Latinate words, as fits his specialized, educated language. Roseanna, the character with the least education, is at the bottom of the

Figure 9. Percentage of Latinate words spoken by major characters.
spectrum, using the lowest percentage of Latinate words. Other voices also offer little surprise. Mr. Murthwaite, another man of education and specialized learning, is also high on the spectrum. So is Miss Clack, which should be unsurprising, based on her overly formal, sentimentalized language.

There are a few surprises here as well, if we are looking at this purely in terms of social class. Notably, Rachel Verinder, despite being of high education, uses only a slightly higher percentage of Latinate words than Roseanna Spearman. Some of this may be circumstantial. Rachel, while she speaks a significant quantity of lines over the course of the novel, has no narrative portion of her own, and therefore more of her lines are comprised of dialogue. Still, it’s worth noting that both women make fairly similar misinterpretations of the evidence suggesting that Blake is the thief. Both trust in what may seem to be very simple, and are unable to comprehend the ambiguity in the situation, unlike the more flexible, linguistically hybridized detective characters.

To provide a counterpoint, figure 10 considers the proportion of Germanic words used by each character. While this follows the same patterns as figure 9 in many cases, it is not a precise reflection of the other, as all characters have a higher or lower percentage of “unknown” words (common names, words not in the dictionary, etc.) which change the percentages. In this chart, Murthwaite, Bruff, and Clack are again at the one end of the spectrum, though in a different order. Godfrey, Jennings, Candy and Franklin Blake, as men of a similar class, are all in the middle in this version, using a mix of Germanic and Latinate. Once again, Rachel and Roseanna are both high in terms of Germanic words.
Figure 10. Percentage of Germanic words spoken by major characters.

Betteredge, unsurprisingly, uses the highest percentage of Germanic words, and again, his purity of discourse is shown to be a disadvantage in interpreting the crime. Betteredge is the “ideal English servant,” and the character who “holds the most class prejudices and distrusts foreigners and outsiders more than any of the other characters,” to the extent that his character can be read as “essentially a reaffirmation of British superiority” (E. Simmons 71). He is one of the few characters to actively comment on the novel’s mix of Latinate and Saxonate language and explicitly align himself with Englishness. Early in the novel, he signals his reluctance to adapt himself to other’s voices, especially when these voices are less “English” than he would like:
Mr Franklin’s universal genius, dabbling in everything, dabbled in what he called ‘decorative painting’. He had invented, he informed us, a new mixture to moisten paint with, which he described as a ‘vehicle.’… Miss Rachel being wild to try her hand at the new process, Mr Franklin sent to London for the materials; mixed them up, with accompaniment of a smell which made the very dogs sneeze when they came into the room; put an apron and a bib over Miss Rachel’s gown, and set her to work decorating her own little sitting-room—called, for want of English to name it in, her ‘boudoir.’ (Collins, *The Moonstone* 63)

Betteredge objects to the word “boudoir” because it is French rather than English, and he’s equally skeptical of Franklin Blake’s descriptions of decorative painting and the “vehicle” for painting. In this aggressive Englishness, Betteredge is ultimately as restricted as is his Saxonate language, and he is a remarkably naïve reader of the detective elements in the story.

We can extend this reading of hybridity in the individual voices to a reading of the novel as a whole. Like the hybridized voices of its detective characters, the novel as a whole is a collection of voices bearing traces of their different contexts and discourses. Different characters speak in the language associated with religion, law, and other forms. The novel is itself a hybrid.

This hybridity applies even in the case of a more detailed analysis than the character etymologies I have displayed here, and shows us how seriously the novel takes its mingling of different contexts. David Hoover notes that the different narrators in *The Moonstone* have a remarkable dissimilarity of voices stylistically. Hoover looks at seven main narrators: Blake, Betteredge, Miss Clack, Mr. Bruff, Mr. Cuff, Ezra Jennings, and Rosanna Spearman. He analyzes each of their narrative segments with principal component analysis—in essence, a determination of word frequencies often used for
authorship attribution studies. Specifically, his method examines the most frequently used, functional words in a corpus, words which are “so routinized as to be unconscious, so that their frequencies constitute an authorial ‘word print’” (Hoover, “Style and Stylistics”). Hoover’s prior testing showed that Collins’s style was distinct, easily separated through principal component analysis from the styles of Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, and Trollope. Within the more precise collection of narratives in *The Moonstone*, Hoover ran an analysis to test how distinct the different voices were, the results of which can be seen in figure 11.

[Image removed for copyright reasons.]

Figure 11. Hoover’s stylistic analysis of *The Moonstone*’s narrators.

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42 Hoover is not explicit about his methodology in this short piece on Collins; his other work, however, suggests that he was most likely using John Burrows’s “Delta” methodology, which evaluates the use of hundreds to thousands of the most frequently used words in a corpus, minus personal pronouns and character names (and sometimes dialogue, though not in his comparison of Victorian authors referenced here). From there, texts or segments of texts can be quantitatively measured based on their use of each of these words. (Much of Hoover’s research involves his automation of the calculations in Excel.) Hoover notes that the high accuracy of Delta on his nineteenth-century corpus: “These results are so accurate that there seems little point in testing any of the alternatives to Delta on them” (“Word Frequency” 43).
The above chart represents a statistical comparison of the most frequent words used by each narrator. Each point indicates one of the chunks of the character’s narration—each of the BETT points, for example, represents a section of Betteredge’s narrative, the CLACK points represent different sections of Miss Clack’s narrative, and so on. The axes are arbitrary designations for the purposes of illustrating the statistical ways these narrators cluster in terms of the similarities and differences in their styles. Hoover notes that “principal component analysis succeeds in separating all of the narrators but Jennings, and his two sections, though widely separated from each other, do not clearly cluster with any other character” (“Style and Stylistics”). From these results, Hoover concludes that “Collins was able to distinguish the narrative voices of his characters distinctly throughout this long novel” (“Style and Stylistics”). The fact that Jennings does not fit is perhaps not entirely surprising based on the inconsistent nature of his diary entries, which include both brief notes and longer bits of narrative. What is remarkable is how distinct these voices are for a single-author work, showing how the novel as a whole is a mix of different styles.

Lest these results be judged too lightly, Hoover provides a control group from Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, another novel with multiple narrators. These results appear in figure 12. While Hoover does see some patterns at work here, interestingly linking different styles to the overall structure of the novel, in which sections are roughly in order from left to right, it’s clear that his conclusion is accurate that “Unlike Collins, James does not consistently distinguish the voices of his characters” (Hoover, “Style and Stylistics”).
The Moonstone characters’ voices, then, are remarkably different from each other stylistically. Yet rather than retaining their own identities purely, the narrative is able to gain vitality from their combination, as the graft of different linguistic heritages strengthens the English language, or as the new context a quote gains in a dictionary strengthens its usefulness. The extended narratives of the novel’s different characters lose their purity as they become adulterated with other voices and quotes, but the overall narrative benefits from its mix of different voices.

Seeing the novel’s celebration of the ways its quotes gain new meaning in different contexts helps us counter one of the oldest criticisms of the novel—that its many voices do not really represent different points of view. An 1868 review of The Moonstone in the Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine takes issue with the
multiple narrators, stating that the evidence Collins thus extracts is “too corroborative to be credible” (“The Moonstone” 485). Their narratives, the reviewer suggests, would not hold up in a jury box, because “the witnesses, though speaking in their own name and over their own signatures, are too evidently in collusion with each other, or manipulated by Mr. Collins” (485). In this analysis, the critic anticipates by over a hundred years D.A. Miller’s argument in *The Novel and the Police* that the appearance of heteroglossia in the novel is deceptive because all of the characters actually tell the same story:

…the “unreliable” and “contradictory” narrative structure of *The Moonstone* works only as a ruse… the possibility of an authentic ‘dialogism’ in the text disappears once we recognize that in every crucial case, all readers pass *the same judgment*. The different points of view, degrees of information, tendencies of suspicion are never allowed to tamper with more basic interpretative securities about character and language. (52–3)

This critique of the novel’s structure is not an entirely unfair one—indeed, the fact is that the narrators are “corroborative” enough that we are clear by the end of the novel on the events, and few readers of any sophistication are likely to misread the idiosyncrasies of a Miss Clack or Gabriel Betteredge to the extent that it interferes with their understanding. Furthermore, this argument is seemingly only reinforced by a point it overlooks, the far deeper congruency of the characters’ trustworthy quotation of other people’s dialogue. But it does not necessarily follow, as Miller concludes, that *The Moonstone* is “more fundamentally about the securities of perception and language than about the problems they pose” (54).

The broader discourse of quotations shows us that this apparently problematic structure—different voices which nevertheless manage to tell a unified story—is actually
a powerful vindication of the vitality offered by a revised view of decontextualized information. The way the novel grafts together different voices to create a new story engages with the problems posed by language. The novel imagines itself as a collection of pieces assembled from what could potentially be much longer narratives about each character’s lives. There is an imagined broader context for each of these sections. These sections, stylistically, are remarkably different. The fact that we get a new story from these opposing bits of decontextualized information becomes a celebratory commentary on abstract information’s ability to take on new meaning in a new context.

Furthermore, the mixed voices bring us to a successful ending. Significantly, this novel made up of displaced narratives and wandering quotes ends with a passage emphasizing connectedness and justice. The last scene in the novel shows the Moonstone returned to the forehead of the Indian deity where it originally belonged: “Yes! 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, *The Moonstone* 472). The diamond also simultaneously remains in endless circulation: “So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventure of the Moonstone? Who can tell!” (The Moonstone 472). Such an ending, I would argue, bears none of the anxiety that haunts the conclusion of a novel such as *Lady Audley’s Secret*. The narrative ends the story of the diamond in a way which both feels final and acknowledges the power of the story which brought it to that location. The diamond is at rest without being dead, returned home, but with the open possibility of continued adventures.
Conclusion

Like the timetable and the telegram, the dictionary rests on an understanding of information in the abstract. The creators of the *New English Dictionary* assume that quotes can be decontextualized from their original works and will still retain the same meaning. A sentence containing an example of word use, the suggestion is, is the same as an actual example of word use within a longer text. It supposedly does not become something else when it enters the dictionary. In practice, however, the dictionary project was haunted by delays in finding appropriate examples, and undercut by debates about which words and meanings really “belonged.”

*The Moonstone* takes up this question to argue that quotes can actually change meaning in different contexts. However, the way which quotes accumulate traces of their new contexts ceases to be a liability and begins to be seen as something that strengthens the vitality or usefulness of the information. The dictionary’s quotes may not retain their pure original meaning when they are put into the new context of a dictionary, but people still find the quotes listed in a dictionary useful. In both cases, we find a new vision of decontextualized information. Whereas the abstract perception of information suggests that quotes would retain their meaning unchanged in a new context, these mid-Victorian texts show the benefits of the ways in which information out of context can acquire new and richer meaning.

*The Moonstone* is often considered an originary point in the detective genre, despite a great deal of evidence contradicting T. S. Eliot’s claim that it is “the first and
greatest of English detective novels” (377). I have worked in this dissertation to counter a developmental narrative which sees the mid-Victorian detective novel as a proto-typical, incomplete version of later novels which represented a far more thorough mastery over information. Detective fiction of the 1860s imagines information as much more problematic and uncertain, and it has little faith in the idea of abstract information which can be detached cleanly from context.

What we do see in these mid-century novels is the development of fictional devices, which respond to particular conceptual tensions in Victorian information culture, and which will later be picked up by more “typical” detective novels. Detectives, following Robert Audley, create timetables and check alibis. Like Mortimer, they spy on conversations and suddenly appear in people’s lives. The balance of voices and emphasis on testimony we find in The Moonstone is another early instance of a pattern which would later become an essential trope in the genre. Most detective novels and stories embody a nesting series of voices—the detective collects one person’s testimony, then another’s, and then tells a story of the crime, which is often corroborated by the confession of the criminal. All of these narratives are told in the first person in an extended quotation, and together they are supposed to form a single story.

The resilience of these tropes points us to one of the central contradictions in mid-Victorian detective fiction. The genre posits that abstract information is problematic, and makes a claim that it is impossible to pull information away from its human uses, physical forms, or original context. Yet even in making this argument, the genre begins to discover that the concept of abstract information can enable interesting aesthetic effects,
like the balance of different voices we see in *The Moonstone* and later detective novels.

Perhaps *The Moonstone* is so often considered the originary point of the genre because it begins to skillfully exploit these aesthetic possibilities of abstract information. *The Moonstone*’s vision of abstract information is one in which information flows, gathers traces of different contexts, and snowballs in meaning. It may not be “real” in the strictest sense, but it does make for powerful literary effects. The final chapter carries this argument a step further with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a text which also develops what would later become a trope of detective fiction—reader interactivity.
CHAPTER 5
THE SHORTENED SERIAL: INDETERMINACY, INTERACTIVITY, AND THE MANY ENDS OF EDWIN DROOD

Introduction

Dick Datchery’s hair is long and white. One day, when he is carrying his hat and meets an acquaintance, he has “an odd momentary appearance upon him of having forgotten his hat, when Mr. Sapsea now touched it; and he clapped his hand up to his head as if with some vague expectation of finding another hat upon it” (Dickens 264). Hundreds of readers of Charles Dickens’s final novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870), have puzzled over this scene. To some, this action suggests that Datchery may be another one of the novel’s characters in disguise, wearing a wig. But which character? Perhaps he is the missing Edwin Drood, returned to town to investigate his own attempted murder at the hands of his uncle, John Jasper. Perhaps he is actually a woman in drag, Helena Landless, who wants to clear the wrongful suspicion that her brother killed Drood. Perhaps he is three different characters at different points in the novel. Perhaps, signaled by his first name “Dick,” he is Charles Dickens himself (or, at least, an editorial figure meant to represent the author).

All of these different possibilities, far-fetched as some of them are, are from published commentaries on The Mystery of Edwin Drood. Charles Dickens died halfway through writing the novel, leaving it unfinished. Since his death, hundreds of critics, literary authors and fans have published theories on how the novel would have ended.
These critics debate about issues such as who Datchery was, whether the missing Edwin Drood was dead or alive, and who the central characters marry.

In each of the previous chapters, I have examined how a specific novel critiques a property of abstract information. In this chapter, I take as my text not a single detective novel, but a body of literature representing reader response over 70 years. This body of literature consists of over 400 works of fiction, drama, poetry, and literary criticism about The Mystery of Edwin Drood, from 1870-1939. We do not often have the apparatus to study reactions for historical readers. Edwin Drood offers an almost unique case-study in how reader response to the same text changes over time.

This chapter uses this body of reader response to examine how the presentation of information changes the way it is received. Information theory is closely tied to questions of reader response. Arguably, the properties ascribed to abstract information are reflections of how that information is received. As Nunberg writes, “all the properties we ascribe to information… are simply the reifications of the various principles of interpretation that we bring to bear in reading these forms” (116). Nunberg traces this, for example, in the newspaper. The newspaper’s organization of information in rows with disparate articles next to each other gives rise to the idea of information as decontextualized, while its promise of journalistic objectivity creates an idea that information is autonomous. Therefore, this chapter seeks to extend information theory to a question of reader response, to examine how readers actually did respond to information.
Like the fiction I considered in earlier chapters, this body of texts on *Edwin Drood* demonstrates skepticism of the new perception of abstract information, which supposedly does not change in nature depending on the way it is represented. Specifically, these texts criticize a supposed property of abstract information that I call “morselization,” building on Geoffrey Nunberg’s term. As opposed to knowledge, often described holistically, information “consists of little atoms of content—propositions, sentences, bits, infons, *morceaux*—each independently detachable, manipulable, and tabulable” (Nunberg 117). By extension, we can see that such “atoms of content” can be morselized—divided up and combined together—supposedly without changing the nature of the information.

Serialized literature in the mid-Victorian era seems to embody this property of morselization. Novels were published in monthly parts, a “morselization” of the novel’s information. These parts were then recombined into volume form and made available for purchase or to borrow in the circulating libraries. We are now inclined to see these novels as being essentially “the same” novel, since they usually contained identical content.

The response of readers to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and to serialized literature more generally shows that Victorians were conscious of the ways morselized information can be received very differently from non-morselized information. The novel has spawned hundreds of continuations, completions, dramatic adaptations, and works of literary criticism over the years. This readerly response is, I argue, different only in scale, not in essentials, from our understanding of the readership of any serialized novel. Against the perception of the information age that a novel in pieces is the same as a novel
delivered all at once, we now see that the gaps between the numbers open up a space in which the reader was “encouraged to participate in the production of the text,” as Rachel Ablow notes (2). The form of the novel, in other words, has a dramatic effect on its reception. Readers of serialized literature were seen as reacting to in a very different way from the way they reacted to novels in volumes, and readers clearly react over time to the morselized text of *Edwin Drood* in a very different way from how they react to Dickens’s other novels.

This reception history shows us the impact of information’s form on the way it is received. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* offers itself up as a fragment, a morsel of an imagined completed whole. Readers respond to the novel in a particular way because it is always imagined as an incomplete piece of something bigger. Had the novel been presented as “complete,” it would have been a strange novel for Dickens to have written in 1870, but it would not have unleashed the flood of speculation which the “fragment” of *Edwin Drood* did, as a shortened serial with an imaginable final half. We still read it as though we are in the gap between numbers, though that gap has extended for over a hundred years.

The reader response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* similarly suggests that the idea of abstract information is flawed, since morselizing information so readily changes its response. But while the reader response I trace in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* tends to disprove some of the claims made by abstract information, it also reflects a gradual change in attitude towards abstract information. Abstract information was seen as deeply problematic in both *Lady Audley’s Secret* and in *Telegraph Secrets*, where it is
represented as sensationalized and dangerous. *The Moonstone* argues that context can change meaning and therefore the idea of abstract information is flawed, but it also shows us the novel beginning to portray the usefulness of the concept of abstract information.

In the response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, abstract information ceases to be portrayed sensationally. Critics base their theories on morselized bits of information—small clues from the text, Dickens’s notes, or the cover image. Significantly, the critics often make a strong claim for the “rational” nature of the bits of information from the novel which they use as their evidence. Unlike the sensational timetables of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, critics imagine their information as being legible and readable, even when this seems to be contradicted by the field as a whole. This emphasis on rationality reinforces the acceptance of the concept of abstract information, since it no longer appears as dangerously disconnected from human needs and bodies.

Over time, critical interest in the novel starts to shift from the text itself and Dickens, the supposed authority on the text, to a wide range of readerly interpretations. The indeterminate form opens a space for a carnivalesque expansion of readerly autonomy, and hundreds of readers gradually become authors with their own continuations, completions, and adaptations of the novel. “Droodiana,” as it is sometimes called, becomes a field in which texts build on and respond to each other, until the discourse surrounding the novel represents something far bigger than the novel itself. The information which the text contains—abstract because detached from its full context—opens a space for a startling growth of readerly autonomy and creativity.
The critics, in this situation, begin to take on the attitude of a fictional detective. Their reading of the text’s “clues” aligns them closely with the detective work within the text they study. Their increasing acceptance of the ways they can use abstract information mirrors an overall shift in detective fiction itself to a field which can create Sherlock Holmes, a detective to whom information is completely legible. The development of these Drood texts thus aligns with a new acceptance, by the end of the nineteenth century, of the idea that information can be imagined in the abstract.

Methodology

Because the methodology by which we read a body of text is quite different from the way we read a single text, this section sets out the methodology used to examine reader response to the text over time. This chapter considers a corpus of texts from 1870-1939. The 1939 end date is based on Don Richard Cox’s conclusion in his extensive bibliography that 1939 “reflect[s] the generally acknowledged shift in Dickens studies,” and was chosen for practical reasons (xi). Ideally, however, this corpus could eventually be expanded to later years. The database is composed of 458 texts. The bulk of these texts are articles from journal articles written about the text, often in a somewhat scholarly style. The corpus also includes longer non-fiction works of literary criticism about the novel, fictional completions, retellings, and homages, reviews of dramatic versions, and poetry. I was able to obtain 403 of these texts and read them. For 55, I rely on descriptions of the text, primarily from the detailed notes in Don Richard Cox’s bibliography. Cox includes at least a paragraph on most of the texts listed, and clearly
makes an effort to include repeated points of interest, such as the text’s proposed identity of Datchery, and Edwin’s fate. Some of these texts will be accessible in future iterations of this project with further research in European archives. Many of these texts no longer seem to exist in any form, as in the case of several early dramatic versions. For these, we know the decisions made by the original author only from the reports in the theatrical reviews.

This collection is not comprehensive, and only texts which offer some opinion about the novel have been included for the purpose of this chapter. (This overlooks, for example, advertisements for the novel or plays which simply report rather than theorize.) The corpus, therefore, should be looked at as a selective rather than a thorough collection; it includes the most important and accessible texts, but does not fully reflect the parameters of the field.

The corpus is also not evenly distributed (see fig. 13). There are many texts from 1870, but relatively few until an explosion of sources in 1905. This sudden increase was caused by the establishment in that year of The Dickensian journal, which formed the center of Edwin Drood criticism for the early 20th century. Except for The Dickensian, criticism is distributed across nearly 120 journals, and the next biggest category is non-journals—i.e., books, plays, etc. (see fig. 14). Despite the emphasis on The Dickensian, this is a far-reaching conversation. Over the course of this project, I account for the imbalance in the distribution of the texts by visualizing my results in terms of the average responses within the decade, rather than relying only on the numerical “hits.” I indicate in
my description of each visualization whether it is an average or a numerical result, if it is not immediately apparent from the visualization.

Figure 13. Distribution of corpus by year.

Figure 14. Distribution of corpus by journal, journals with 2% or over labeled.
This chapter approaches this material through several different methodologies, two of which require some additional explanation: manual coding and topic modeling. First, I read all of the texts I had in physical form and tracked them manually along several variables (see table 6). The first column is meta-commentary on the text. The first category, genre, refers to the genre of the piece of Droodiana. The corpus encompassed topics including literary criticism (the biggest category by far), fictional completions, fiction about the novel, dramatic adaptations, and verse. The next three categories trace critical assessments about the novel. “Predictability” is an indicator of whether the texts mention that *Edwin Drood* can or cannot, should or should not be predicted. The “quality” of the novel includes any assessment of whether it was high or low quality. This category contains both explicit statements about the novel’s worth, and broader assessments about whether Dickens’s skill was at its highest pitch or in decline at the end of his life. “Plotted,” a particularly interesting category for the detective scholar, is an assessment of whether or not the novel was believed to have been a tightly-plotted detective story (often signaled in these texts by a comparison to Wilkie Collins). This category was also often tied to assessment of the work’s quality, though in an inconsistent way. Both plottedness and unplottedness were read by critics as positive or negative traits affecting the novel’s perceived quality.

Table 6. The twelve nodes of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Edwin’s Survival</th>
<th>Jasper’s Fate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictability</td>
<td>Datchery</td>
<td>Puffer’s Role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Rosa Marries</td>
<td>Neville’s Fate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plotted</td>
<td>Helena Marries</td>
<td>Cover Images</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next two columns concern reader response to particular plot points of the novel. Edwin’s survival, the identity of Datchery, and Rosa and Helena’s marriage partners are all relatively clear-cut categories. The next three responses are somewhat more ambiguous, but I have recorded them as accurately as possible and standardized them wherever it was feasible. Jasper’s fate, when it is mentioned, usually includes some combination of death by accident (i.e., an overdose), death by suicide, death by disease (i.e., dying of madness), or simple imprisonment. In a few texts, he is forgiven or is even innocent. There is enough variation and ambiguity to make quantifiable recording difficult, but I have recorded it in as many cases as possible because it shows similarities between the texts. Puffer’s role tends to range from being discovered as a long-lost relative (Jasper or Deputy’s mother, Durdles’s wife, or the mother of a woman whom Jasper has wronged) to simply being a character who will later assist the investigators in some way. Neville’s fate is most often tragic, and several theories involve him being tragically thrown from the tower by Jasper, who is then convicted of his murder. He does occasionally play a more heroic role, and in several versions he wins Rosa.

The final category, the “cover images,” tracks how different readers interpret the cover image, a detailed drawing published with the novel’s first number. The “cover images” category actually encompasses several sub-categories, since it traces the perceived identity of multiple characters on the cover. For the purposes of my analysis, the inconsistency with which critics interpret this cover serves as a microcosmic representation of the problems of interpretation offered by this fragment.
These nodes are not, of course, a completely comprehensive picture of the sorts of questions that interest critics in the period studied in this project, but they are an attempt to track the central points of contention which have been most consistently identified by critics over time. I initially began by tracking nearly twice as many possible “variables,” but I found that these twelve yielded the most interesting data. Some threads of criticism clustered so particularly in a time frame as to show little importance chronologically, as in, for example, the different commentaries on a particular dramatization, which look at the same “node” but tend to cluster in a year or two around the dramatization. Also not included are questions which appear very sporadically or only in the longest examinations of the novel—for example, the question of Deputy’s role. Other categories which I initially tracked showed too much consistency to offer helpful information, such as the question of who knew about Edwin’s survival. For those texts which addressed this question, the answer was almost invariably “Grewgious.” The twelve nodes of study here are, therefore, not a comprehensive set, but are the “healthiest” and most interesting of a wide range of possibilities, a group culled from a potential dataset tracking twice as many questions, to the ones which proved most interesting to critics over time.43

The manual coding component of this methodology is roughly based on Franco Moretti’s identification and tracking of the “clue” in “A Slaughterhouse of Literature.” Moretti and his graduate students read through a wide sample of 1890s detective texts to evaluate their use of “clues,” classifying the stories based on whether clues were present, necessary, visible, and decodable. The problem Moretti points out with manual coding

43 For the purposes of this chapter, I ultimately end up discussing only a few of these nodes, but I include the description of all to give a fuller sense of my methodology.
methods in literature is that our selection of what is important is ultimately based on which features we *currently* think are important. Clues “won” in detective fiction, and therefore, he points out, any data that tracks clues overlooks the alternative methods of making meaning that might have been present in these detective texts: “No matter what our intentions may be, the research project is a tautological one: it is so focused on a canonized device… that in the noncanonical universe it can only discover… the absence of the device, that is, of the canon” (Moretti 226). Similarly, the twelve criteria I identify in Drood are the criteria that tend to come up again and again, but do not necessarily give a full picture of the field in all of its permutations.

In order to rectify this problem, this chapter also uses a second methodology. I used the digital humanities to open a space for including aspects of these texts which I might not myself notice. In addition to reading and manually coding the texts, I also ran them through Mallet’s topic modeling algorithm. I using cleaned versions of my texts (such as those found in *Project Gutenberg*) whenever possible, but most of my texts were PDFs which had to be run through OCR software and cleaned with a combination of proofreading and regular expressions. For some texts the OCR failed entirely, and the texts had to be manually retyped. The texts in the corpus are at about a 95% accuracy level. These documents consist of 1,464,546 words. The documents were each kept in a separate file for the purposes of topic modeling; the average word count of these files was about 3,600 words.

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44 A small random sample of ten texts, checked manually for incorrect words against the total word count, scored 97.8% accuracy.
Topic modeling on a corpus of this relatively small size is somewhat problematic, so I have used it here as a supplement to the manual reading and coding, rather than as the principle set of new data created for analysis. The project also does not address every topic equally, but instead focuses on a relatively small selection of possible topics for discussion. I ran the corpus through Mallet’s topic modeling algorithm multiple times, in versions which both used and excluded character names. Here, I emphasize topics which appeared consistently in each of these different iterations. I also took into consideration the overall percentage in which each topic appears. As an additional gauge of the “health” of the topic, I used Excel to calculate the correlations between different versions of the same topic, based on the percentage in which each topic appeared per decade. I place more emphasis on topics which show a stronger correlation to topics in other iterations.

All visualizations of Mallet topics in this project represent the average percentage that a particular topic appears in all of the texts in that decade, and are made in Excel. The topic names listed in the charts are place-holders summarizing the words in that particular topic. Whenever relevant, the chapter also includes word clouds showing the most important words in that topic scaled for size, all made using Wheaton College’s Lexos toolkit. The inclusion of these word clouds is intended to more fully illustrate the reasoning behind the interpretation I put on these particular topics.

The two methods of analysis—manual coding and topic modeling—often yielded similar results, as this chapter will discuss. I found many congruencies, as indeed we

45 The version of the topic modeling results which is visualized in this project includes character names, with the exception of “Edwin Drood” which appears in every text, and “John Jasper” which appears in almost as many.
would expect in different methods of studying the same set of texts, and no clear examples of the topic modeling seeming to oppose my manual results. The results diverge primarily in the types of questions they seem to address. Mallet is best for showing broad trends in the discourses, while the manual coding offers more immediate insight into how the specific questions changed over time. Using both methods together gives a fuller picture of this corpus of texts than either method does on its own.

The Serialized Reader

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* just by being incomplete, gives a fairly clear sense of the ways in which morselizing information can change its content. Abstract information seems to promise that information in morsels can be recombined; Dickens’s death exposes the practical problems with that model. This project, however, focuses not on abstract information itself, but on the reader’s response to it. Therefore, it’s useful to consider how morselized information affected reception in the broader context of Victorian readership.

As in the case of the timetable, telegraph, and dictionary, I am looking at an “information technology”: serialization. (Again, I use the term “information technologies” loosely to describe a host of new or changing structures concerned with how information is processed, organized, stored and distributed.) Serialization is not a new nineteenth-century form the way the timetable or telegraph were, but like the dictionary, it was a form which was changing in use and social perception during the mid-Victorian era.
According to the idea of morselized information, breaking information into pieces does not influence the way it is received. The social conversation around serialization contradicts this idea. Victorian novels often went through two life-cycles. They were serialized, issued in pieces either by themselves (the “novel in numbers” format, a favorite of Dickens), or were issued along with other material in weekly or monthly magazines. Later, they were printed again in three volumes and delivered to the circulating libraries for further reader consumption. There is an assumption inherent in this system that these two forms are both the “same” novel, the identical “text” as we now understand the concept. Again, this idea of the information age is tied into the concept of information in the abstract—the idea that information, parcelled into individual pieces, is the same as the information delivered all at once. If the concept of abstract information is accurate, the package should have no influence on the transmission of the content.

In reality, of course, the experience of serialized reading was very different from the experience of full-novel reading, and the mid-Victorians were particularly aware of this difference. Different forms of the same novel were proliferating in this period. Joanne Shattock, considering the period 1820-1880, notes that this rise in fiction publication and formats is “unprecedented”: “What was new was the scale of the operation, the size of print runs, the sums of money involved to both author and publisher, and the number of formats in which a single novel was produced” (3). These formats included expensive three-volume novels, monthly parts published individually, magazine serials published with other materials, and one-volume reprints at various
prices (20–1). A novel seemed to appear in more and more diverse packages than ever before. This change was fueled by an increased literary mass market, which demanded novels at a range of price points. As Nicholas Dames notes, “wonder and bewilderment at the sheer size of the fiction industry are among the more common notes in the repertoire of the Victorian critic” (291).

Simultaneously, there seemed to be more readers than ever before. Wilkie Collins, in his 1858 essay “The Unknown Public,” is amazed by “the discovery of an Unknown Public; a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel Journals” (208). Collins’s pseudo-ethnographic tone in this article and his use of words such as “mysterious” and “unfathomable” are a mark of the rapid change which seemed to be occurring in the mid-century, particularly clustered, as Deborah Wynne argues, in the late 1850s (29). As Kelly Mays notes, critics were increasingly self-conscious about the expansion of the publishing industry, leading to criticism with “a new directness and a sense of urgency born of... an overwhelming abundance of printed matter and an equally dramatic increase both in the number of readers and in the amount of time such readers devoted to reading” (165).

46 Of course, despite social perception, the actual development of a new literary market was more gradual. Readership had been on the rise since the eighteenth century and continued to expand alongside free public education through the nineteenth-century, long before the mid-century moment which is the subject of this project. Deborah Wynne argues that “it was actually the first half of the century which had seen the unprecedented growth in readers” (26). These new readers were often workers, and required much more inexpensive forms of reading than expensive three-volume novels. From the 1830s onwards, working class readers turned to “cheap serialized fiction, much of it plagiarized from the novels read by the richer classes...” (27). Bentley’s Standard Novels, on the other hand, provided inexpensive reprints of out-of-copyright and previously unsuccessful novels from 1831 on (Shattock 8). 1842 saw the opening of Mudie’s, the most powerful of the circulating libraries, which “supplied the reading material of the middle classes of London and beyond” through a subscription system which was far more affordable than buying the books outright (6). Routledge’s Railway Library, which “capitalize[d] on the opportunities for reading which railway travels provided,” opened in 1848 and provided travelers with more inexpensive novels and reprints (8).
It is particularly telling that despite the many technical and social reasons for this expansion—the elimination of taxes on periodicals, the rise of shilling monthly magazines, and so on—critics who write about this shift are mostly interested in how different forms of packaging a novel influences the novel’s effects. Specifically, we often find the serialized novel described in the language of addiction or physical craving, associated with physical hunger, and linked to the need for violent stimulation.\footnote{Wynne notes multiple instances in which sensational serialized reading is described as a “poison” desired by the “hungry minds” of readers (28–9). Kelly Mays argued that reading habits were “consistently described with reference to bodily ingestion—eating, drinking, and drug-taking… like these, reading was an act guided by the most primitively sensual urges—‘thirst,’ ‘hunger,’ and ‘craving’” (172).}

Margaret Oliphant, in her review of the sensation novel, identifies the serialized form as the cause of many of its worst abuses in terms of the physical sensations it seems to necessitate. Oliphant speaks of the “violent stimulation of serial publication… with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrences of piquant situations and startling incident” (568). Serialized literature, for Oliphant, is the underlying cause of the sensation novel’s flaws, and far too often relies on cheap sensationalism to bring the readers back the following week (584).\footnote{Oliphant places Dickens’s Great Expectations (at the time his latest novel) into this category.} For Oliphant and similar critics, the form which a novel takes influences not only its content, but even the physical effects which a novel induces.\footnote{As Nicholas Dames argues, the sensation novel (the most visible example of serialization) “was more often studied via the bodily effects it evoked rather than its potentially scandalous topics, such as forgery, bigamy, and political conspiracy” (298–9).}

The discourse around serialization, in other words, tends to disprove the concept of morselized information, which can be split and re-combined without affecting its reception. For Victorians, serialized reading was seen to have a real effect on readers, though critics disagreed (and still disagree) about what these specific effects were. Recent literary criticism has seen a trend towards work on affect, which often argues for the
distinctly *interactive* nature of Victorian reading.\(^5^0\) Linda Hughes and Michael Lund note that:

…interpretation of the literature went on during the expansive middle of serial works. Readers and reviewers engaged in provisional assumptions and interpretations about the literary world, which then shaped the evolving understanding of works as they continued to unfold part by part… (*The Victorian Serial* 8)

In other words, this seemingly passive, addictive form of serialized and sensationalized fiction was, for real readers, actually a site of comparative interactivity, a moment when the readers gained agency over the text. During these gaps in the story, readers became writers as they took the opportunity to “review events with each other, to speculate about plot and characters, and to deepen ties to their imagined world” (*The Victorian Serial* 10).

In fact, Hughes and Lund go so far as to argue that modern readership studies that “place great emphasis on narrative endings, resolutions that retrospectively validate patterns throughout a text” have “downplayed the experience of first readers who spent months without an ending to authorize response” (“Textual/Sexual Pleasure” 143). In the lack of an authorized version, readers joined with writers in the active creation of the text.

Both of these opposing discourses of serialized reading—the reader as autonomous creator and the reader as trapped addict—equally reveal skepticism of morselized information. This chapter is, however, more aligned with the idea of serialized reading as increasing readerly autonomy, since this does seem to reflect the pattern of *Edwin Drood* criticism. A divided text opens up a space for reader speculation,

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\(^{50}\) See, for example, *The Feeling of Reading* (2010), edited by Rachel Ablow, and *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007) by Nicholas Dames.
whether that divided text is the traditional serialized novel or the much more permanently divided narrative of *Edwin Drood*.

**Rational Evidence in the Cover Image**

In the response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the critics I study use their own morselized bits of evidence to theorize about how the novel would have ended. In this section, I track responses to one particular piece of this evidence, the novel’s cover image. The history of the image and the extreme variation we see in responses to it demonstrate to us that morselized information does indeed provoke a different reader response than non-morselized information. This section shows us, however, that readers are willing to embrace the contradictions of abstract information. In fact, critics consistently present the evidence they use as rational, using rhetoric of certainty and specificity. Even while their varied responses to the image demonstrate how morselization changes reader response, they align their evidence with the rational side of the rational/sensational dichotomy.

As evidence to predict the ending, the cover image leaves much to be desired. The cover’s relationship to the written text is already tenuous. Published with the opening number of the novel, the cover image includes scenes which seem to hint at later events in the novel. This is one of many types of evidence which critics used to form their theories of what really happened to Edwin Drood. Other options for evidence include close reading of the text, accounts from the author’s family and close friends, readings of Dickens’s scant notes and the original manuscript, comparisons with other Dickens
novels, and even supposed spiritual communications from the deceased author. The cover image is not the least credible of these options, but it exists at a remove from the text which the critics seek to interpret, and, therefore, it is far from the most obviously compelling source of clues to the ending.

The cover design is usually credited to Charles Collins, originally the novel’s chosen illustrator, whose design is shown on the left (see fig. 15). Collins fell ill, however, and Dickens chose to work with Luke Fildes, who finished the cover and completed the other illustrations for the novel. His design is shown on the right (see fig. 16). Critics note the difficulty of knowing whether the changes between the images represent different decisions on the part of the artists, or changes in Dickens’s plans. Some parts of the two images look nearly the same, as in the case of the “Lantern” scene which would become the subject of the most speculation. Other images represent definite changes. For example, the staircase vignette originally seemed to include police officers, who are later replaced by private citizens.\footnote{This, at least, is Margaret Cardwell’s interpretation in her 1972 introduction to the novel. Cardwell notes that “unless Collins mistook Dickens’s intention here, Fildes’s drawing denotes a later change of plan, possibly with a view to the… interest to be achieved by keeping the whole mystery and detection essentially private” (“Introduction” 241).}
In fact, critics in the period 1870-1939 demonstrate a strong awareness of the limitations of the cover for forming a reliable argument about the end of the novel. We lack records on what both of the artists were told and which version is more accurate. Furthermore, it is by no means clear that the art should be brought in as evidence at all. C. F. Lehmann-Haupt notes that Collins told Fildes that “he did not in the least know the significance of the various groups” on the cover and that “they were drawn by him from
instructions personally given by Dickens, and not from any text” (300). This does not make the vignettes unreliable, but it means that the artists might not have had a full sense of the meaning of the pictures they drew.

In response to this ambiguity, the critics in my study tend to argue against drawing definite conclusions from the image. As R. A. S. Macalister points out:

“We must not expect… accuracy in minute details. Thus, while the scene between two lovers on the left-hand side of the cover must represent one of several love-scenes in the book, it is futile to try to find out which, from the costume and attitude of the characters” (403).

Some critics also point out that the cover was drawn before the first part was published. B. W. Matz reminds us that the design was made “not only before the first part was published, but before Dickens himself was in a position to know definitely what he actually meant to do with his characters” (66). Finally, critics have pointed out that it can be hard to predict events from the cover even if the cover is completely accurate. Alfred Bean for example, states: “To show how misleading illustrations may be will you kindly refer to the original illustrations in… Battle of Life” (251). Taking a comparative stance, Bean notes that the cover illustrations for Dickens’s novella *The Battle of Life*, while accurate and made with Dickens’s full approval, would suggest a different ending than the actual ending.

Furthermore, the field as a whole shows us that there was widespread disagreement about the meaning of the images, further reinforcing how these morselized scraps are disconnected from the meaning the critics seek. To take one example, consider the scene of a man kneeling near a woman (figure 16). The woman in this scene is generally believed to be Rosa—there appears to be no disagreement on this point in the
years I examined, 1870-1939. However, a range of characters are proposed by critics for this man (fig. 17). Neville is the dominant choice here—either bidding Rosa a sad farewell or successfully wooing her, depending on how the different critics believed the story concluded—but more than anything else we find indeterminacy. Jasper and Tartar are offered as possibilities in nearly equal measure, meaning that the dynamic between the two characters can be equally interpreted as a woman being wooed by successful lover Tartar, and by Jasper, a man so horrible to Rosa that she flees town.

Figure 16. Details of the “wooer” scene.
Figure 17. Characters proposed for “wooer” gentleman.

Despite this clear ambiguity in the image, critics make strong claims that the evidence they find in the cover is rational. We find theorization about the vignette couched in language of certainty and specificity. G. E. Jeans writes in a 1917 article in *The Living Age* that the vignette is “fairly obvious” since “the most natural interpretation is that this is Neville taking his farewell of Rosa” (29). In this same article, Jeans will urge another critic to examine the picture with a magnifying glass in order to better understand it, a gesture of specificity which is also repeated by other critics. Critics often use magnifying devices to fasten in on the minute details of the image. Andrew Lang, for example, states that “I can see no whiskers, even when I use a microscope” on the wooer image (“A New Theory of Edwin Drood” 3). Ethna Kavanagh builds her theories around the fact that “the young man holds Rosa’s hand palm upward, and is gazing earnestly into it” (100). This emphasis on the magnifying glass and on the minute detail is a common
trope in the criticism, despite the convincing evidence that the cover should not be examined in such detail. This demonstrates how morselized information has begun to be portrayed in a rational way.

We see a similar ambiguity of image combined with rhetorical certainty in the image of the staircase (fig. 18), an image which has attracted even more theorization than the “wooer” scene. Examining the field as a whole shows us how deeply contested these images were during this time period (see fig. 19). There are a startling range of possibilities offered for each of these figures, with even less consensus than we saw in the “wooer” scene. Most of the male figures in the novel are represented here, and several characters appear in all three charts. Only the bottom figure gains a clear majority from a perceived clerical appearance. All in all, other options still predominate, and fully fourteen characters are suggested for these three figures.
Figure 18. Detail of staircase scene.
When critics speak about this image, however, they again make a claim for the rational nature of the information it contains. Again, we find theories about the novel couched in the language of certainty and specificity. Harry B. Smith, for example, simply specifies that the top figure “is” Neville Landless, while Jeans suggests that the lowest
figure “cannot be anyone” besides Crisparkle (Smith 399, Jeans 29). We again find invitations to seek out miniscule details, as when Andrew Lang responds to a disagreement with the critic H. J. by stating: “I can only invite the curious to look at the picture with a microscope and say whether H. J.’s Durdles is or is not ‘well dressed’ and a gentleman” (“A New Theory of Edwin Drood” 3).

The most frequently discussed image is the lantern scene, which often has a place in debates of whether or not Edwin Drood survived (fig. 20). This image is placed in the bottom center of the cover, and has often been read as having some particular significance. In 1972, Margaret Cardwell notes the prominent position of the illustration and the similarity of the image in the two versions of the cover, and states that it offers a “clear depiction of a specific, not a general or symbolic, situation” and undoubtedly “formed an extremely important part of Dickens’s plot from the outset” (“Appendix E: The Illustrations” 242). Her claims that the image represents a specific, unwritten scene is characteristic of how earlier critics tend to speak of the vignette.
Figure 20. Detail of the lantern scene.

In fact, as images go, this one has actually provoked surprisingly little critical disagreement during the time span I investigated, especially compared to the other images. The figure on the right is overwhelmingly identified as John Jasper, Edwin Drood’s murderous uncle (fig. 21). The figure on the left is often considered to bear a resemblance to Edwin Drood, as he is represented in the top vignette of the cover, walking with Rosa (see fig. 15). Compared to the men running up the staircase, he is not even that ambiguous a figure. Fully 83% of the texts which theorize about this vignette identify this figure as resembling Edwin Drood (fig. 22).
Figure 21. Identification of man with lantern.

Figure 22. Characters proposed for man revealed by lantern.
Again, we find language of critical certainty in interpretations of this image during my time frame. An anonymous article from *The Graphic* takes it for granted that “The very wrapper reveals the fact that when Jasper again enters the crypt, expecting to see his nephew a skeleton, he finds him alive” (“The Mystery of Edwin Drood” 275). Meanwhile, Andrew Lang also builds his theory of Edwin’s survival around this image. In his *Westminster Review* article, Lang notes that “I was certain that this figure is Drood himself” (Lang, “Edwin Drood”).

The majority opinion during the first seventy years after the novel was published, however, is that Edwin Drood was actually killed. Some critics even claimed that the novel would be ruined if Drood were to return. Furthermore, the one single piece of inside knowledge claimed by the artist, Luke Fildes, is that Edwin Drood actually died. Fildes offers no explanation for this particular cover image and different critics have offered reasons for and against believing his evidence. Still, fully 56% of critics in the time period I am examining believe that Edwin Drood definitely died.

The critics, in response to this conundrum, discount the apparent similarity to Drood which they have noticed and instead present alternative explanations for this image’s meaning. One popular theory is that it represents not Edwin Drood himself, but Helena Landless, who in this reading has disguised herself as Drood in order to trick Jasper into confessing. Others theorize that this scene represents something in Jasper’s imagination or even Edwin’s ghost. These explanations allow critics to acknowledge that the image does resemble the other image of Edwin without it needing to have an effect on the plot, reducing real “Edwin” theories from 83% to 44% (fig. 23). Critics are even
prepared to overlook the details of the figure’s face and fasten in on other details. For example, one article in *The Observer* hints that the figure is actually Helena in disguise, stating, “Another curious point is that, while the cut of the coat is masculine, it buttons over from right to left, after the fashion of a woman’s garment. Was this a slip of the artist’s pencil, or another ‘clue’?” (“Still Waiting for the Key” 5).

![Pie chart showing character identification]

**Figure 24.** Characters proposed for man revealed by lantern. Different versions of Edwin divided.

When these critics identify this figure as resembling Drood and then discard that identification, it brings to the forefront the question of how the morselization of information changes its interpretation. In this case, the reader response proliferates even when the evidence seems to be comparatively clear-cut. This shows us how the
morselization of information actually opens it to a host of new, proliferating meanings. The fact that morselized information changes the reader response we see in these examples feeds in to a broader discourse on serialization, and the imagined effects which a novel in parts might have on the reader who consumed it in that form.

The cover image provides the most dramatic example of this pattern, but all of the evidence these critics use balances a sense of the indeterminacy of the text’s details with a strong assertion of the rationality of these details. To take another example, Richard Anthony Proctor’s *Watched by the Dead: A Loving Study of Dickens’ Half-Told Tale* (1887) makes an almost completely opposite argument as an anonymous 1884 article for *Cornhill Magazine*, attributed to H. Edwards. Proctor thinks that Drood is alive, and Edwards thinks he is dead. Proctor thinks that Datchery is actually Edwin Drood in disguise, while Edwards argues that Datchery is not a character in disguise at all, but is a professional detective hired by the lawyer Grewgious to investigate Drood’s death. Examining the texts against each other demonstrates how contested the questions are, and how intensely morselization does affect interpretation.

However, in using the textual evidence to make their arguments, both authors make similar assertions of the rational, logical nature of their evidence. Proctor, for example, goes so far as to assert that “very little of this suggested close of Dickens’s Half-Told Story is invented,” because “Dickens himself told very nearly all of it” (137). Proctor even goes so far as to place himself as a better reader of Dickens than Dickens himself: “It may even be doubted whether Dickens himself knew how clearly he had disclosed Edwin’s real fate for those who knew his voice” (151). Edwards takes a similar
rhetorical tact, noting that “the solution here suggested is based on *internal evidence only*” by using “simply and solely... the story as left by Charles Dickens” (Edwards 308). The author is as confident as Proctor that his solution is actually derived solely from Dickens’s clues, and notes that he has invented nothing, but has tried merely to “deduce a correct conclusion from somewhat incomplete premises” (308). Both author’s certainty that the morselized pieces of the novel can be reconnected to an imagined ending show an acceptance of the concept of information as something which can be morselized without changing its meaning.

**Growing Autonomy in *Drood* Readers**

The response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* demonstrates a changing attitude towards abstract information. The morselization of information does not really work the way it is supposed to. Morselized information is interpreted incredibly differently when it is divided from its original context. Yet even though responses to *Edwin Drood* tend to disprove the internal myths of the information age, it does not, I argue, become a problem the way it does in some of the other texts I have considered. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the failure to link abstract information to human meaning becomes a plot device, a way for the novel to rewrite its own epistemological structures. In *Telegraph Secrets*, an attempt to reestablish the concreteness of the telegram leads us to aesthetic failure. The response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is a more intensified version of *The Moonstone*’s eventual vindication of decontextualized information as possessing its own value. Critics of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* are drawn to it not because it can ever be recombined
with an ending, but because its morselized pieces enable a proliferation of possible meanings. Ultimately, what seems to be a repeated exploration of the text’s problems turns into a celebration of the text’s imagined morselization.

Drood texts tend to take on a playful aspect which undermines their apparent emphasis on fixing definite meaning. Instead of simply striving for a solution, works of Droodiana often end up celebrating or embracing the indeterminacy of the uncertainty they seek to resolve. In the field as a whole, this playfulness becomes what I am calling the “carnivalesque:” a space where the range of interpretations brings its own type of aesthetic joy. I take the term from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1965), with its valences of the overturning of authority and the atmosphere of laughter and “play” which characterizes Droodiana.

This aspect of “play” is evident even in the earliest works of Edwin Drood continuation and completion. To take just a few examples, Orpheus C. Kerr’s *The Cloven Foot* (1870) plays with the mutability of the text’s evidence when the John Jasper character inadvertently mislays both his nephew and his umbrella.52 Throughout the text, the Jasper character laments his umbrella, while others around him are far more concerned with the missing nephew. This comic early text is often identified as the first completion of the novel. Much of this text was written concurrently with the publication of the parts of the novel when Dickens was still alive, and the spoof hastily wrapped up the story when the numbers unexpectedly cut off. Kerr also uses the novel to poke fun at novelistic conventions, mocking, for example, “that mysterious madness for open-air exercise which afflicted every acquaintance of the late Edwin Drood…” (235).

52 “Orpheus C. Kerr” is a pseudonym for Robert Henry Newell.
Another example of play can be found in the somewhat improbable 1874 “Spirit-Pen” version, supposedly penned by Dickens from the afterlife through the medium of Thomas Power James. This novel often gets attention as one of the more ridiculous renderings of textual adaptation in the field, but I argue that the novel also can be interpreted as possessing a similar drive towards metafictional humor, especially in its more extravagant claims. The medium’s preface notes a theory that:

the Evil One was at the bottom of the whole business; and it was said that, at a certain hour every night, his Satanic Majesty could be seen emerging from the chimney of my house and flying away into space, leaving behind him such a strong odor of brimstone that one could smell it for an hour afterwards; and, I suppose, no chimney ever attracted so much attention, or inspired such feelings of awe as that one did, in consequence of this libel upon its fair bricks and mortar. (James viii)

These details indicate a Twain-like satire. Furthermore, “Thomas Power James,” the supposed Vermont medium, makes the comment that the first book is generally not as good as the second book written after death through a medium. He accordingly announces that the first chapter of Dickens’s next work, “The Life and Adventures of Bockley Winkleheap,” has been completed, and “opening with all the peculiar characteristics of its author, bids fair to equal anything from his pen while on earth” (x). Such a novel was never produced.

In this attitude of humorous and open interaction with the original text, James goes so far as to add an “Author’s Preface” to Edwin Drood professedly written by Dickens. In this preface, “Dickens” makes observations about spiritualism, mediumship, and the afterlife, and comments that “Since the fact of this work being in preparation was first made public, I have been pained to observe the ridicule which was apparent in some

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53 Given up, perhaps, when the author realized how seriously the public was taking the satire.
published articles” (xii). The open circumstances and unfixity of the novel’s information have made it a place to experiment with metafictional humor.

Later texts take this readerly interactivity to an even higher level. In 1914 a group of celebrities and members of the Dickens Society held a “Trial of John Jasper” with the goal of determining, once and for all, the real solution of the mystery. Author and critic G. K. Chesterton served as the judge, and George Bernard Shaw was the jury foreman. The trial ended inconclusively with Chesterton declaring everybody besides himself in contempt of court. The Trial was apparently proposed with the goal of shutting down Drood criticism; however, it became a space of additional interactivity, play, and critique. A Philadelphia Dickens society repeated the trial, claiming that Jasper had escaped to the U.S. and must be retried in America. Again the trial became a humorous social event, culminating in a hung jury leaning towards acquittal, since no body had been found. These readers wrote and rewrote the scrap of text into an interactive story, and then dressed up and took on the parts of different characters. More recently, The Mystery of Edwin Drood’s link to interactive theatrics was solidified in the Rupert Holmes’s 1985 musical version, which allows the audience to vote on the ending and change the plot accordingly.

If this aspect of play is visible in the individual texts, it is also evident in the body of Droodiana as a whole, an observation which particularly lends itself to discussion via quantitative methods. In the first few decades after Dickens’s death, the dominant belief was that the ending could be figured out. As the decades went on, the idea that the novel was unpredictable began to predominate (fig. 24). This graph is based on my manual
coding of which texts state that it’s possible to predict the ending, vs. what percentage state that the ending is unpredictable. Each point is the average in that decade of all texts giving an opinion one way or the other. Based on the dominant belief that the novel is unpredictable throughout most of the early twentieth century, we would expect speculation to die down as the fruitlessness of the endeavor becomes apparent. My research suggests, however, that speculation actually grows in creativity and depth during that time frame, despite a dwindling belief in the solvability of the novel. This growth, which is visible in various modes in my data, seems to demonstrate an ever-increasing approval of the possibilities presented by the concept of abstract information.

Figure 24. Perceived predictability of end of novel over time.
As an example, figure 25 tracks two variables by decade: the percentage of texts which offer opinions of any kind about the quality of the novel, and the percentage of texts which offer opinions on the identity of Datchery. At the beginning of my time frame, readers are very focused on Dickens’s reputation and often speculate on how the novel fits into his legacy. This is what we might term an “author-centric” debate. Such comments often emphasize Dickens’s sudden death and the incompleteness of the novel, which is often either addressed wistfully as his best work or as evidence of his tragic decline. Over time, people become less interested in Dickens’s reputation and more interested in the identity of Datchery, a more “reader-centric” topic. The discourse thus shifts from an emphasis on abstract information as lack (a missing author) to abstract information as opportunity (an engaging debate).

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54 Orpheus C. Kerr, for example, argues that “the half of the novel which we have, is unmistakable evidence that another half could not possibly have formed a whole in any way equal to the standard which the author’s previous triumphs had erected for himself” (8). A piece from The Spectator, on the other hand, suggests that the novel lives up to Dickens’s best works, stating, “Any critic who holds that Dickens had lost the youthful élan of his humour in writing that passage [on Grewgious’s waiters], must clearly have himself lost all the youthful élan essential to the full appreciation of humour” (“The Mystery of Edwin Drood (Book Review)” 1177). Both pieces, as it happens, were written in the same year, 1870.
Figure 25. Average number of total texts in a decade offering any sort of opinion on the novel’s quality or on Datchery’s identity.

My data collected through topic modeling reinforces the trend from my manual coding. Figure 26 compares a selection of “reader-centric” and “author-centric” topics over the course of my time frame. This data suggests that author-centric topics tend to die away while reader-centric topics generally gain prominence. Again, for reader-centric topics, I include a topic I’ve called “Datchery,” a topic composed of the character’s name, the characters who readers thought might be Datchery, like Bazzard and Helena, the main critics of the Datchery debate like Walters and Proctor, and some of the main evidence these critics use—like Datchery’s eyebrows, voice, and hair. I also include a similar topic, which I label “Theorizations.” It follows a somewhat similar trajectory to the Datchery debate, growing over the course of the century. Like the Datchery category,
the “Theorizations” topic is very focused on different readers and their opinions, and includes words like reader, theory, solution, problem, fact, discussion, etc. (fig. 27). Contrast these reader-centric topics—“Datchery” and “Theorizations”—with the two author-centric topics, the “Genius Author” and “Other Dickens” (fig. 28). Initially dominant topics in the 1870s, these latter topics become notably less apparent in texts by the early twentieth century, and they never gain the prominence of “Datchery” or “Theorizations.” The author-centric topics both are more interested in Dickens the man than in speculation about readers. They reference other Dickens novels and character names, and refer to Dickens’s characters and genius. The fact that such topics die away to nearly nothing shows us a readership wrestling control from the author.

Figure 26. Select reader- and author-centric topics comparison.
Figure 27. Reader-centric topics: “Datchery” (top) and “Theorizations” (bottom)
We also see a rise of autonomy within particular categories. Figure 30 expands on the question of the identity of Datchery, which opened this chapter. The chart goes chronologically by year, looking at all of the possible suggestions for Datchery, with points of varying sizes for how many people proposed a particular Datchery that year. At the beginning, there are relatively few proposed possibilities for his identity, and these are centered on the major male characters of the novel—Bazzard and Edwin, and later,
Neville and Tartar. As time goes on, more and different characters are proposed, snowballing into an ever-increasing range of possible Datcherys (fig. 29).
Figure 29. Range of possible Datcherys over time.
These possibilities, as I have suggested, also become increasingly extravagant, moving from the major male characters to more far-fetched ones, including Mrs. Crisparkle’s brother-in-law, a Datchery played alternatively by three different characters, and even Charles Dickens himself. These alternatives represent a burgeoning of readerly autonomy over time, as readers increasingly embrace the possibilities offered by the imagined vision of morselized information.

This pattern of expansion is one that occurs in every way I visualize this data. Figure 30, made in the network analysis software Gephi, represents Don Richard Cox’s annotated bibliography of 1,902 texts, from 1870 to 1997. In his entries, he often lists references to other texts in the bibliography. For example, he might note that a particular text is a review of a particular adaptation, and reference that adaptation’s citation. While this method is not comprehensive—Cox is not recording every possible connection between texts—what is important here is that a human literature scholar, who probably knows more of the Drood corpus than almost anyone else, believes a relationship of some sort exists between the texts. This seemed significant enough to warrant a graph. The nodes represent different texts. They are bigger based on how many texts refer to them and are referred to by them, and they are colored based on what category of text they are in Cox’s bibliography—he divides by categories such as dramatizations, continuations, early and late analysis, ephemera, etc. The edges represent a relationship between the texts. The network itself is too large to show in its complete form here. Figure 30 is a representation of the entire network that gives its general shape.
Some of what the chart reveals is not so surprising—continuations and plays tend to inspire a collection of literary criticism, as we see here in the relation between the text of James’s “Spirit Pen” completion and the cluster of textual criticism that surrounds it (fig. 31). Similarly, we are not surprised to find that the influential Charles Dickens edition is referenced in entries for other editions of the novels (fig. 32). The labels correspond to the color, and indicate what type of text it is in Cox’s bibliography, though for illustrative purposes I have occasionally manually adjusted the name to reflect a particular text.
Figure 31. Detail of literary criticism clustering around Spirit-Pen completion.

Figure 32. Detail of literary criticism clustering around Charles Dickens edition.

What is most surprising is what we find centrally located in this web of influence: texts which are centrally-located because they make the most connections and influence the other texts the most. Rather than the novel itself or even the major fictional completions, we find several works of Edwin Drood criticism from before 1939, all of
which have proved exceedingly influential (fig. 33). These theorizations seem to have triggered ongoing speculation, radiating out from the center to influence other texts, forms, and later time periods. What we are witnessing here is an indeterminate fragment of text made into a vibrant and ever-expanding carnival of options, as readers increasingly reference not the novel itself, but the field of speculative possibilities growing out of the novel.

Figure 33. Influential works of criticism by Proctor, Walters, Lang, etc.

The field of Drood criticism, then, demonstrates aspects of play in its individual texts, shows increased readerly autonomy and creativity over time, and builds from a few early central theories to spawn an increasingly wide range of possibilities. Droodiana also, as my data demonstrates, appropriates an increasing range of diverse discourses into the debate. Readers designed new and creative ways to participate in the growing field of
Drood discourse. Mallet seems to be especially effective for showing such changes in the discourse. For example, this chart shows three Mallet topics over time (fig. 34).

![Figure 34. Three Mallet topics charted over time by average percentage in that decade.](image)

The “genius author” category, as we know, is especially prominent right after Dickens’s death. By the 1880s and 90s, this speculation has died away, but we see growth in a category I have called “Rochester” (fig. 35). Rochester is a real town, the model for the fictional city of Cloisterham in the novel. This topic emphasizes the physical space of the cathedral, doors, streets, towers, gardens. This shows readerly speculation moving into the field of literary tourism. Even though there are fewer texts and theories overall,
there is increased interest in traveling to places that might allow readers to develop a new experience of the novel.
Literary tourism dies down, though it does spike again at the end of the time period of my study. We find yet another discourse supplanting it—the mock trials of John Jasper, discussed previously. The words of evidence, guilt, jury, and reasonable doubt make the discourse of Drood even more interactive, as the conventions of law begin to give readers a new vocabulary for considering the novel (fig. 36). Such changes do not represent a readership struggling to retain abstract information’s meaning in different
forms. Instead, the readership actively celebrates the ways in which morselized information leads to new forms of making meaning.

Conclusion

The response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* discussed in this chapter exposes the ways in which morselizing information actually changes its reception. The fact that we read the text as a morsel of an imagined whole opens up a field of speculation into the text’s possible meanings. As in the case of my other texts, I link this tension to an equivalent problem in an information technology; in this case, the reliance on serialization as a means of transmitting fictional information. Geoffrey Nunberg notes that information in the abstract sense “doesn’t change its nature according either to the medium it is stored in or the way it is represented—in principle, we needn’t alter the informational content of a table when we transform it to a bar graph, of a novel when we convert it to a comic book” (117). In theory, then, a novel in parts is the same as a novel in one piece. Victorians, with their anxieties about a new reading public, were clearly skeptical of this idea. Dickens’s final novel offers a particularly apt demonstration of the ways in which information’s form does in fact influence its reception.

The changing critical response to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, however, suggests that the abstract perception of information need not be read as a problem. As a belief that the novel could (or even should) be solved declines, the number and range of solutions increases. The least credible evidence, as in the case of the wrapper image, produces some of the strongest language of critical assuredness. Abstract information is
embraced by these critics as an imaginary construct which enables a whole new field of aesthetic production.

Significantly, the information presented in the case of *Edwin Drood* is frequently explicitly placed by critics on the “rational” side of the rational/sensational dichotomy. Such a dichotomy, as I have suggested, was not really developed in mid-Victorian detective fiction, in which supposedly “rational” acts of information management and organization are actually often sensationalized. I demonstrated this in the case of the railway timetable and the telegraph, suggesting that the clues may now seem rational to modern readers of detective fiction, but for Victorian readers the evidence of timetables and telegraphs would have been problematic and sensationalized. The corpus of *Edwin Drood* shows critics being remarkably confident about the rationality of their own analysis, as I demonstrated here, for example, in the response to the cover images. In this later time frame of the early twentieth century, when the rational/sensational dichotomy had been fully formulated, the critics identify their own literary detective work as rational.

Critics from 1870-1939 often explicitly identify their analysis as a form of detection, demonstrating the connection between their work and the detective literature they analyze. One of the strongest threads of the discourse from topic modeling is a topic I call the “critic as detective,” one of few topics which seems to consistently grow (fig. 36). This category is populated by words of mystery, plot, and author, along with the search for evidence, solution, and the crime (fig. 37). Within this theme, the critical
endeavor becomes linked to the fictional act of detection, and the critic steps into the indeterminate role of Datchery, an outsider trying to solve the mystery of *Edwin Drood*.

Figure 36. All Mallet topics, averaged by decade, shown, with “Critic as Detective” topic emphasized.
Going against such literary detective work, modern literary criticism has long since rejected the effort to “solve” the novel. Scholars now often claim a greater interest in Drood’s existing text than in how it would have ended. Essentially, we now try to imagine the text as a whole. But we continue to be drawn to interpret the novel in ways which destabilize our supposed scholarly apparatus. Gerard Joseph’s 1996 article, “Who Cares Who Killed Edwin Drood? Or, on the Whole, I’d Rather Be in Philadelphia,” claims that “the novel comes to a satisfactory close with what we now have in chapter 22:
there is not, nor need there be, any more” (170). The article is a critique of so-called “Agathist” criticism, which is overly concerned about Drood’s plot and ignores it as a character study. Strangely, even though Joseph’s argument is directly opposed to theorization about the ending, Joseph ultimately makes some of the same rhetorical moves as the earlier critics he disparages, stating that “I do believe Jasper killed Drood… I will eventually concentrate upon the evidence in chapters 1 and 22, upon the very beginning and the very end of what we have, to allude to that opinion in passing” (162).

Perhaps this is a minor moment; a solution brought up, as Joseph says, “in passing” in order to make his point about the relevance of character over plot. However, this same rhetorical shift is repeated by critics far too often to be purely accidental. Jill Matus initially starts with a similar disinterest in the novel’s ending in Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction (2009):

Unlike many commentators on the novel, I am not going to offer a solution to the question of Edwin’s fate (dead or alive) and Jasper’s crime (murder or attempted murder of his nephew). Rather, I want to consider how the novel engages on many levels with questions about the fragmentary self, memory and states of altered consciousness. (107)

As she explores the complex psychic fragmentation of the plot’s characters, she calls the novel “indissolubly perplexing,” a text which “defies processing, integration and assimilation” (105). Despite this stance, which seems to deny both the possibility and the usefulness of completing the ending, we find the following statement: “Jasper’s alibi will doubtless not hold, which is why he will find himself in the condemned cell” (120).

Matus’s comment should not surprise us; as recently as 2013, in an article unconnected to the ending, Natalie McKnight notes in passing that “if the plot was to pan out as the hints
in the text suggest, and as Dickens seems to have stated to John Forster, Luke Fildes, and
Charles Collins, his son-in-law and the illustrator of the cover, then there weren’t many
surprising twists ahead…” a remark which strongly implies McKnight’s belief that Drood
would have died (61–2). In 1992, Doris Alexander, in her article about altered states and
“anomalies of consciousness,” soon finds herself caught by the detective fever, arguing
that “given Dickens’s strong sense of responsibility to his reader, he would not have
wiped out a young life like Drood’s casually” (126, 128).

Such small and scattered shifts into speculation, often not directly tied to the main
arguments of these articles, do not detract from the overall force of these critical
arguments. It is worth asking, however, why such speculation continues even in an
atmosphere in which serious literary criticism is often hostile to or dismissive of such
speculation. The irresistible lure of the drive to speculate was repeated as recently as fall
of 2014, during which the website Cloisterham Tales re-published the monthly numbers,
presenting different evidence and inviting online polling and speculation. The online
exhibit culminated in a one-day conference on September 20, 2014, the call for papers of
which read, “We welcome proposals for 20 minute papers which will explore the themes
of the book or the insights its subsequent treatment can provide on Dickens’s reputation,
as well of course as any discussion of theories on how the story ends!” (Orford). We
theorize almost in spite of ourselves, knowing full well that no explanation can be
accepted as definitive, aware that such speculation is incompatible with the supposedly
more serious goals of literary scholarship.
We now operate in a discipline in which abstract information has been fully accepted. We can study the novel and talk about the autonomous “text,” disconnected from the author’s intentions or the reader’s response. We can consider a novel as disembodied from its material context (in fact, we produce far more close readings of a text than we do readings of a book’s material culture). While much Victorian criticism does seek to recover context, literary criticism has traditionally imagined a novel as a decontextualized form. We consistently read novels without remembering the ways in which they have supposedly been morselized and recombined. When we put forward our own theories about *Drood*, we celebrate the possibilities of proliferating information normalized for us by the detective texts of the Victorian period.

Ideally, this project could be extended to the present day, to show how our own criticism of the novel engages with and also extends this earlier field of Drood writing. It is my theory that such an extension of the data would reveal that our critical endeavors, often so dismissive of speculation, are just another of many possible offshoots of this carnival of readerly autonomy, akin to mock trials and literary tourism. Perhaps criticism has taken such an enduring hold as regards this novel because, like a mock trial or a visit to Rochester, it offers us the possibility of entering into the novel’s world.

**Coda: The Implications for Detective Fiction**

This project has argued that the mid-Victorian era was a time of radical shift in concepts of information, and that recovering this context allows us to form richer readings of 1860s and 70s detective fiction. The end of my work on *Edwin Drood*
extends far beyond this period to 1939, and shows us a society which has, by and large, accepted the usefulness of the concept of abstract information. Detective stories written in the 1930s and beyond do not tend to represent information in the sensational way that the mid-Victorian detective novel does. The clues often do seem to add up to the ending.

The critical detectives of *Edwin Drood* are a bit different from the fictional detectives of the early twentieth century, but their attitude towards the problem of information is remarkably similar. From the sensational and problematic representations of detective fiction in the mid-Victorian era, the genre forged a new vision of abstract information. Removing content from context and making it “abstract,” the genre suggests, clearly does change the way it can be used and perceived. However, the very openness of abstract information, its freedom from a set context, offers new aesthetic and creative avenues of exploration. In a sense, then, what we ultimately see is a field in which speculation on information has shifted. Detective fiction in the 1860s and 1870s briefly considers the problem of information management, but by the 1890s, it has accepted the contradictions of abstract information and begun to celebrate it.

Perhaps this new embrace of the concepts and contradictions of abstract information can be most clearly observed in the rise of the “clue.” Later detective fiction often revolves around a series of clues, a device which contains many of the properties of abstract information. The clue is a morsel of decontextualized, autonomous information, which must be returned to its full context in order to be understood. Detectives in fiction seek to resolve the meaning of clues, which may seem to show a continuing skepticism of the idea of abstract information’s usefulness and applicability. However, the overall form
of detective fiction celebrates the abstract nature of the clue—the way its content has been separated from the necessary context. The widespread use of the “clue” in detective fiction ultimately celebrates the aesthetic possibilities presented by the idea of abstract information. We read to see what the clues will mean.

The clue is both a detail in a text and a formal device in the detective narrative, a device which by its nature must be taken out of context, and which must have an indeterminate, variable meaning. Franco Moretti defines the clue as “that particular element of the story in which the link between signifier and signified is altered. It is a signifier that always has several signifieds and thus produces numerous suspicions” (146). As a detail in the text, the clue is a problem to be resolved. But in the field of detective fiction as a whole, the clue is a powerful literary technique which is one of the genre’s conditions of being.

I end with an example of how detective fiction plays with its new vision of abstract information created by mid-Victorian detective fiction. E. C. Bentley’s Trent’s Last Case (1913) is, like all detective fiction of the “Golden Age,” invested in fixing its clues back to a particular context, and thus restoring the full meaning of the clue’s content. Simultaneously, the novel celebrates the aesthetic effects created by experimenting with abstract information’s freedom from context. The victim of this novel possesses a manic hatred for his secretary, and so he kills himself and frames the secretary for the crime. At the end of the novel, the secretary confesses how he discovered the plot and altered the clues to avoid detection, and the detective exonerates him of the murder. Later, with the plot apparently resolved, the detective takes out a
friend tangentially related to the case out to dinner. In the novel’s final page, the
detective’s friend calmly announces that he knew the secretary to be innocent, because “I
shot Manderson myself” (Bentley 174).

A clue’s context, the suggestion is, is always capable of being supplanted by yet
another narrative, which will further alter the events and make it impossible to fix
meaning. Such a twist is a more extreme version of The Moonstone’s exploration of the
ways in which meaning can be fixed and refixed through different voices, or the readers
of The Mystery of Edwin Drood’s celebration of the novel’s indeterminacy. When content
is detached from context, it gains the capacity to be endlessly rewritten and reimagined. It
is not pure essence—but it does offer an expansive field for creative expression in
detective fiction.
REFERENCES CITED


APPENDIX

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