



# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Charles Dickens

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Gillen D'Arcy Wood*

George Stade  
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS  
NEW YORK



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## FROM THE PAGES OF *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. (page 7)

Every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. (page 16)

There was a character about Madame Defarge, from which one might have predicated that she did not often make mistakes against herself in any of the reckonings over which she presided. (page 35)

Death is Nature's remedy for all things, and why not Legislation's?  
(page 56)

Those were drinking days, and most men drank hard. (page 88)

The leprosy of unreality disfigured every human creature in attendance upon Monseigneur. In the outermost room were half a dozen exceptional people who had had, for a few years, some vague misgiving in them that things in general were going rather wrong. As a promising way of setting the right, half of the half-dozen had become members of a fantastic sect of Convulsionists, and were even then considering within themselves whether they should foam, rage, roar, and turn cataleptic on the spot. (page 108)

The transition to the sport of window-breaking, and thence to the plundering of public-houses, was easy and natural. (page 157)

“Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule.”  
(page 177)





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# CHARLES DICKENS

Born on February 7, 1812, Charles Dickens was the second of eight children in a family burdened with financial troubles. Despite difficult early years, he became the best-selling writer of his time.

In 1824, young Charles was withdrawn from school and forced to work at a boot-blackening factory when his improvident father—in fact, his entire family, except for him—was sent to debtor's prison where they remained for three months. Once they were released, Charles attended a private school for three years. The young man then became a solicitor's clerk, mastered shorthand, and before long was employed as a Parliamentary reporter. When he was in his early twenties, Dickens began to publish stories and sketches of London life in a variety of periodicals.

It was the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) that catapulted the twenty-five-year-old author to national renown. Dickens wrote with unequaled speed and often worked on several novels at a time, publishing them first in monthly installments and then as books. His early novels *Oliver Twist* (1837-1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), and *A Christmas Carol* (1843) solidified his enormous, ongoing popularity. When Dickens was in his late thirties, his social criticism became biting, his humor dark, and his view of poverty darker still. *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Bleak House* (1852-1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) are the great works of his masterful and prolific later period.

In 1858 Dickens's twenty-three-year marriage to Catherine Hogarth dissolved when he fell in love with Ellen Ternan, a young actress. The last years of his life were filled with intense activity: writing, managing amateur theatricals, and undertaking several reading tours that reinforced the public's favorable view of his work but took an enormous toll on his health. Working feverishly to the last, Dickens collapsed and died on June 9, 1870, leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* uncompleted.

# THE WORLD OF CHARLES DICKENS AND A TALE OF TWO CITIES

- 1811** Jane Austen publishes *Sense and Sensibility*, arguably the first modern English novel.
- 1812** Charles John Huffam Dickens is born at Portsmouth to John and Elizabeth (née Barrow) Dickens. The government orders a group of Luddites, an organized band of laborers opposed to the industrialized machinery that threatens to replace them, to be shot down.
- 1817** The Dickens family moves to Chatham, in Kent. Charles begins reading the books in his father's library; his favorites include the works of Miguel de Cervantes, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett.
- 1822** The Dickens family moves again, this time to Camden, in North London. Charles quickly and fastidiously learns the landscape of London, an invaluable resource for his later writing.
- 1824** Charles is sent to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, a manufacturer of boot-blackening. His father is arrested for debt and imprisoned for three months, and while the rest of the family stays with John Dickens in prison, Charles lodges elsewhere and continues pasting labels onto bottles of blackening at Warren's.
- 1825** John Dickens retires on a naval pension, and Charles attends Wellington House Academy, a private school where he wins a prize in Latin.
- 1827** He becomes a clerk in a solicitor's office.
- 1829** After learning shorthand, he establishes himself as a reporter for the law courts, Parliament, and various London newspapers. He meets Maria Beadnell and falls in love with her.
- 1831** Dickens joins the journalistic staff of the *Mirror of Parliament*; he transcribes speeches by the members of Parliament on such topics as factory conditions, penal reform, education reform, the Poor Law Commission, and the First Reform Bill of 1832.
- 1833** After four arduous years, Dickens's affair with Beadnell dissolves in the face of her family's disapproval. He publishes his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," in the *Monthly Magazine*. The British Parliament passes the Factory Act, which regulates child labor and forces children to attend school until age thirteen.
- 1834** Dickens becomes a journalist for the *Morning Chronicle*, a job that requires frequent travel and attendance at political meetings. He continues to publish stories and sketches in periodicals. The Poor Law Amendment Act ends out-of-door relief (aid given to the poor in their own homes) and compels those in need of assistance to enter workhouses, where conditions are very harsh.

- 1835** ~~Dickens becomes engaged to Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of George Hogarth, editor of the *Evening Chronicle*.~~
- Dickens writes in several different genres and achieves significant literary success. Adopting the pseudonym “Boz,” based on his pronunciation as a young child of Moses as “Boses,” Dickens publishes in volume form *Sketches by Boz*, a collection of his earlier writings. He marries Catherine Hogarth; the couple eventually will have ten children.
- 1836** Dickens becomes intensely and unceasingly prolific, continuing to write feverishly throughout his life. He begins *The Pickwick Papers*, his first novel, which sets the precedent of serialization that he will follow for nearly all of his novels. He meets his future biographer John Forster.
- 1837** Victoria is crowned queen. Dickens becomes the editor of *Bentley’s Miscellany* and begins publishing installments of his novel *Oliver Twist* in the journal.
- 1838** *Oliver Twist* is published in three volumes, while the serial publication in *Bentley’s* continues. The novel is extremely popular, and three dramatic versions are produced in London theaters in the winter of 1838-1839.
- 1839** *Nicholas Nickleby* is published. Because of tension with Richard Bentley, Dickens resigns his editorship and devotes himself fully to writing. The Dickens family moves to Devonshire Terrace.
- 1840** Dickens establishes his own weekly miscellany, *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, and writes all the content himself. After eighteen months, sales fall off, and he is forced to abandon the periodical. To generate capital, he quickly begins serial publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.
- 1841** Dickens publishes *Barnaby Rudge*. He publicly denounces the child-labor laws and abysmal factory conditions of the times; he lambastes the Tories, who oppose humane labor laws.
- 1842** Accompanied by Catherine, an exhausted Dickens travels to America, where he is lionized. His popularity there falters upon the publication of *American Notes*, a chronicle that records his negative reactions to the United States.
- 1843** Dickens publishes the most famous and best-loved of his annual Christmas books, *A Christmas Carol*, which had taken him only a matter of weeks to write.
- 1844** The Dickens family relocates to Genoa, Italy, where they remain for a year.
- 1846** Dickens signs on as the first editor of the *Daily News* but soon leaves because of disagreements with the publishers. The family moves to Switzerland, then Paris, and remains abroad for six months.
- 1847** Upon his return to London, Dickens helps Miss Angela Burdett Coutts start a home for reformed prostitutes, which he later runs. William Makepeace Thackeray begins publishing *Vanity Fair* in monthly parts.

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- 1848** *Dombey and Son*, published in one volume, heralds Dickens's more mature and decidedly dark period, which over the next two decades yields such major works as *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Dickens begins to run a private theater, in which he acts and performs for charity. His company of amateurs includes painter Augustus Egg, who depicts scenes from novels by Sir Walter Scott, Thackeray, and other writers.
- 1850** Realism becomes a conscious agenda among artists working in media such as painting, literature, and theater. Dickens establishes his weekly magazine *Household Words*, which is succeeded by the end of the decade by his publication *All the Year Round*.
- 1851** Dickens's father dies. The author meets landscape painter Wilkie Collins, who has a gift for mystery writing and whom Dickens admires greatly. Dickens's theater troupe performs before Queen Victoria.
- 1857** Dickens's marriage becomes increasingly strained. *The Frozen Deep*, a melodrama written jointly by Dickens and Collins, stars Dickens and the enchanting actress Ellen Ternan, with whom he falls in love. Ternan, twenty-seven years Dickens's junior, haunts the author's fiction from this time on. Dickens tours Switzerland and Italy with Collins and Egg.
- 1858** Dickens embarks on an exhausting series of public readings, which earn money but take a toll on his physical health. He and Catherine separate.
- 1859** *A Tale of Two Cities* is published.
- 1860** Dickens settles in rural Gadshill, his residence for the rest of his life.
- 1861** *Great Expectations* is published in three volumes. Dickens begins a second series of public readings that lasts two years.
- 1863** Dickens's mother dies, followed by his son Walter's death in India. After quarreling with Thackeray, Dickens reconciles with him just before Thackeray's death. The world's first subway, the Metropolitan Railway, opens in London.
- 1865** A shaken Dickens survives a disastrous train accident after he returns from France with Ellen Ternan, who is rumored to be his mistress.
- 1867** Dickens journeys again to America, where he reads publicly in Boston, New York, and Washington.
- 1868** After returning to England, Dickens continues to give public readings despite his declining health.
- Dickens begins his last series of readings in London. He publishes six parts of *The Mystery*

**1870** *of Edwin Drood*, but the novel's com position is halted by his sudden death in June. Charles  
Dickens is buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1855, at a time of brewing public resentment over the slowness of political reform and a disastrous military failure in Crimea, Charles Dickens wrote to the liberal parliamentarian A. H. Layard of the imminent danger of social revolution in England:

I believe the discontent to be so much the worse for smouldering instead of blazing openly, that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the first Revolution, and is in danger of being turned by any one of a thousand accidents—a bad harvest—the last strain too much of aristocratic insolence or incapacity—a defeat abroad—a mere chance at home—into such a Devil of a conflagration as never has been beheld since (*Letters*, vol. 7, p. 587; see “For Further Reading”).

*A Tale of Two Cities*, which Dickens sat down to write a few years later, is only in part a “historical” novel. On Dickens’s mind was not so much the state of France in 1789, as the current state of England and his fear of public riots and mob violence in the streets of London. Karl Marx, in an article for the *New York Daily Tribune*, wrote that Dickens had “issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together” (August 1, 1854); but, unlike Marxism, Dickens’s politics were essentially a matter of inexhaustible personal sympathy, not an abstract program of social change. To the extent he conceptualized social groups at all, the dominant author of the Victorian age saw himself as a leader of a new, aspirational middle class in British society, one that concentrated its reformist energies on Parliament, and whose values of family, charity, and fair-dealing far transcended the brutish will of any mob. Dickens’s lack of sympathy for the Parisian *sansculottes* in *A Tale of Two Cities* is thus directly correlated to his apprehensiveness over revolutionary rumblings at home. Dickens had a grand social vision for his own city of London, but it did not rhyme with *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

Dickens invented Victorian London as a theater of the imagination, and in his sixteen novels he ushered literally thousands of characters onto that stage. The colorful Dickensian army of Pickwick, Micawbers, and Little Nells—not types, but singular, unrepeatable citizens of the metropolis—formed a line of imaginative defense against what Dickens perceived as the darker potential of urbanized humanity: their transformation into an undifferentiated mass, a mob. In 1849 he attended a public execution for the purpose of observing the behavior of the crowd, and came away horrified by what he had seen:

I believe that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution this morning could be imagined by no man . . . thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians and vagabonds of every kind, flocked to the ground, with every variety of foul and offensive behaviour. Fightings, faintings, whistlings, imitations of Punch, brutal jokes, tumultuous demonstrations of indecent delight when swooning women were dragged out of the crowd by the police with their dresses disordered, gave a new zest to the general excitement. When the sun rose brightly—as it did—it gilded thousands upon thousands of upturned faces, so inexpressibly odious their brutal mirth or callousness, that a man had cause to feel ashamed of the shape he wore, and shrink from himself, as fashioned in the image of the Devil (*The Times*, November 14, 1849).

Dickens writes here in his role as concerned citizen and liberal reformer, but the letter reads like a draft for one of the famous crowd scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities*. There is one apparent discrepancy: The scene is London, not Paris—Horsemonger Lane, not the Place de la Révolution. B



for Dickens, the “brutal mirth” and “callousness” of the mob, as a destructive social menace transcends national boundaries: It is the same tale in both cities. The first depiction of a mob we see in the novel is in fact an English one, an “ogreish” swarm of “blue-flies” at Charles Darnay’s trial at the Old Bailey. At his unexpected acquittal, “the crowd came pouring out with a vehemence that nearly took him off his legs, and a loud buzz swept into the street as if the baffled blue-flies were dispersing in search of other carrion” (pp. 80-81).

In the preface to his gripping novel of mob violence, Dickens acknowledges his debt to Thomas Carlyle’s dramatic history, *The French Revolution* (1837). Carlyle was the first writer to convincingly evoke the world-historical energies of the event itself, which transformed not only France, but dragged all Europe into a maelstrom of war and political upheaval from which eventually emerged the modern nation-states of the continent we recognize today. Carlyle’s swirling tumultuous prose, full of breathless outrages and bloody imagery, is a true revolutionary register, and Dickens knew well he could not improve upon it. But if the thrilling set pieces of *A Tale of Two Cities*—the storming of the Bastille, the September massacres—recall Carlyle, Dickens’s damning judgment of the mob more closely echoes conservative politician and theorist Edmund Burke. In 1790, in the midst of the first great shock of events in France, Burke described the abduction of the King and Queen in terms that sent a permanent shiver through the British body politic:

History will record that on the morning of the 6th of October, 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite and troubled, melancholy repose. . . . A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen and pierced with hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and, through ways unknown to the murderers, had escaped to seek refuge from the feet of a king and husband not secure of his own life for a moment. This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 62).

In his novel of the Revolution, Dickens expresses pity, even outrage for the downtrodden individuals under the yoke of France’s ancien régime and abhors that regime itself; but once its oppressed citizens transform themselves into a mob, he is filled with the same disgust and horror he experienced at the hanging at Horsemonger Lane. Dickens never concedes the loftiness of French revolutionary ideals because his vision is filled with Burkean images of the revolutionary militias, whose pitiless violence renounced not only human ideals but reason itself:

The mad joy over the prisoners who were saved, had astounded him scarcely less than the manly ferocity against those who were cut to pieces. One prisoner there was, he said, who had been discharged into the street free, but at whom a mistaken savage had thrust a pike as he passed out. Being besought to go to him and dress the wound, the Doctor had passed out at the same gate, and had found him in the arms of a company of Samaritans, who were seated on the bodies of their victims. With an inconsistency as monstrous as anything in this awful nightmare, they had helped the healer and tended the wounded man with the gentlest solicitude—had made a litter for him and escorted him carefully from the spot—had then caught up their weapons and plunged anew into a butchery so dreadful, that the Doctor had covered his eyes with his hands, and swooned away in the midst of it (269).

In many of Dickens's novels, it is children who experience the keenest terror, trapped in an adult world of violent caprice and cynicism in which they have no power to defend themselves. Pip's encounter with Magwitch on the marshes in *Great Expectations* is the most convincing description of childhood fear in literature, and David Copperfield's persecution at the hands of the Murdstones has the power of archetype, a modern-day "Hansel and Gretel." Dickens's success in evoking the terror of the mob in *A Tale of Two Cities* (it is what most readers remember long after they have forgotten Lucie, Darnay, and the rest) lies in his transferring those real and imagined terrors of childhood, of which he is the fictional master, to the adult world and the stage of history. Returning to his native Paris, Doctor Manette stumbles into a scene of infantile nightmare: a world where bullies and gamblers and revenges and tattletales are removed from the relative security of the playground to the public square turned death trap. The Manettes and their entourage, the grown-up "innocents" of the tale, fight for survival in this murderous topsy-turvy city, where the helplessness and dread of childhood seem once again the permanent conditions of existence; presiding over the carnage is the totemic Guillotine like some monstrous, deadly toy come to life and let loose in the playroom: "Along the Paris streets the death-carts rumble hollow and harsh. Six tumbrils carry the day's wine to La Guillotine. All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine" (p. 367).

When Dickens expressed to A. H. Layard his fear of revolution in Britain in 1855, he only echoed many dozens of commentators over the preceding six decades, who wondered why mob violence could not simply cross the English Channel and turn the streets of London into a bloodbath of class retribution. The textbook historian's answer points to the bloodless coup of 1688, the so-called Glorious Revolution, which saw the tyrant James II forced into exile, and William and Mary inaugurate a form of managerial rule in Britain, a constitutional, "mixed" monarchy where many absolute powers of the Crown were ceded to Parliament. With the consolidation of that legislative body, however unrepresentative, Britain's nobility insured itself against the apocalyptic disaster that was to befall their French counterparts. The divergent tale of the two cities thus begins in 1688.

But as a novelist, Dickens, who loved Paris and traveled there often, offers more intuitive, close-observed reasons for the untranslatable quality of that city's Revolution. In an 1856 article for his weekly magazine, *Household Words*, he calls Paris "the Moon," and describes a culture of spectacle implicitly alien to his London readers. On the grand Parisian boulevards, Dickens watches the upper classes put on "a mighty show." Later, he takes coffee and a cigar at one of Paris's ubiquitous cafés and participates in a kind of collective voyeurism unfamiliar to the English capital:

The place from which the shop front has been taken makes a gay proscenium; as I sit and smoke, the street becomes a stage, with an endless procession of lively actors crossing and re-crossing. Women with children, carts and coaches, men on horseback, soldiers, water-carriers with their pails, family groups, more soldiers, lounging exquisites, more family groups (coming past, flushed, a little late for the play). . . . We are all amused, sitting seeing the traffic in the street, and the traffic in the street is in its turn amused by seeing us ("Railway Dreaming," pp. 373-374).

Paris is a society of spectacle, a glamorous outdoor "stage" where citizens are both actors and audience. Later in the article, however, Dickens describes a more sinister aspect of this culture of display when he is jostled by the crowds at the Paris morgue, whose "bodies lie on inclined planes within a great glass window, as though Holbein should represent Death, in his grim Dance, keeping his shop, and displaying his goods like a Regent Street or boulevard linen-draper" (p. 375). Dickens is unnerved here, as he was at Horsemonger Lane, by a society that places no restraints on visibility.

even to preserve the solemnity of the dead.

It is a short step in Dickens's imagination from the peep-show atmosphere of the Paris morgue in 1856 to the ritual slaughter in the Place de la Révolution during Robespierre's "Reign of Terror" (1793-1794). *A Tale of Two Cities* shows the dark side of urban theatricality, that a public appetite for glamorous "show" can rapidly degenerate into an insatiable hunger for "scenes of horror and demoralization." The essentially theatrical quality of Parisian social life produces a theatrical Revolution. At the revolutionary "trials" at the Hall of Examination, Madame Defarge, we are told, "clapped her hands as at a play." There is something uniquely Parisian, too, in the spectacle of the liberation of the Bastille (with only seven prisoners inside) and in the rituals of the Terror itself, as the tumbrils roll daily to the guillotine watched by knitting ladies, who take up seats in their favored spots each morning as if at a sideshow or circus. As Dickens describes it, even the victims of the Terror cannot escape the theatrical atmosphere of the proceedings. Among the condemned, "there are some so heedful of their looks that they cast upon the multitude such glances as they have seen in theatre and in pictures." Contrast this with Charles Darnay, who, on trial for his life earlier in the novel, disdains "the play at the Old Bailey": He "neither flinched from the situation, nor assumed any theatrical air in it." Our hero disappoints us on occasion, but here, by resisting being converted into a spectacle, he defends the most important social principle of the novel: the dignity of the private citizen in the face of the howling mob.

Theatricality is not the monopoly of the Terror. As the scene of the royal procession at Versailles shows, public exhibition was a deep-grained aspect of French court culture that, when revolution came, translated easily in the imagination from the palace to the public square:

Soon the large-faced King and the fair-faced Queen came in their golden coach, attended by the shining Bull's Eye of their Court, a glittering multitude of laughing ladies and fine lords; and the jewels and silks and powder and splendour and elegantly spurning figures and handsomely disdainful faces of both sexes, the mender of roads bathed himself, so much to his temporary intoxication, that he cried Long live the King, Long live the Queen, Long live everybody and everything . . . until he absolutely wept with sentiment (p. 172).

An aide to Thomas Jefferson (who served as ambassador to France from 1785 to 1789) saw in the King's *levée* an "Oriental splendor and magnificence"; the wild geographical inaccuracy of the description only reinforces our sense of how deeply alien French court culture was to the emerging liberal Anglo-American sensibility. The grotesque pomp and negligence of the royals that Dickens describes might itself have represented sufficient justification for revolution, were it not for the mindless response of "the mender of roads," a hapless would-be revolutionary who shows himself so susceptible to the glamour of court spectacle that he weeps and wishes long life to those very people he has sworn to destroy. The dangers of a society of spectacle are summed up in his response. Whether it is the court of Louis XVI or Robespierre's revolutionary committee, no government that asserts its power in the form of public exhibition can guarantee control of its audience's reaction. The irrational fervor inspired by spectacle may distract the people from ideology, as it does the mender of roads at Versailles, who is disarmed by "sentiment"; but spectacle may just as easily produce the murderous revolutionary dance of the *carmagnole*, and the tumbrils that bring everyone—Louis and Robespierre, royals and revolutionaries alike—before the indiscriminate justice of the guillotine.

A tale of two fundamentally different cities, then? Given Dickens's fascination with mob violence, it is not surprising that his only other historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), describes the mo

significant popular uprising in London's history, the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, during which mobs roamed the streets for three days and ransacked Parliament. Nevertheless, the fact that Dickens needed to draw on events from the prerevolutionary era (and that the protest itself fizzled) suggests that the Gordon Riots are the exception proving the rule for the history of English civil unrest. Dickens's London, with its bad weather in place of sunny boulevards, and private clubs instead of cafés, does not possess the physical or cultural conditions for successful revolt. Mobs form in London in *A Tale of Two Cities*—at Darnay's trial, and the burial of Roger Cly—but just as quickly melt away.

But the society of spectacle has a second, more sinister aspect from which England is *not* immune to paranoia. Dickens in Paris watching the passing crowds, who in turn watch him, might pass for a harmless afternoon's entertainment in the city, but when the opportunity for seeing and being seen is hardened to an expectation, or even a right to total visibility, it is a short distance to paranoia and a culture obsessed with secrets. When there is no escape from the social gaze, voyeurs quickly turn into spies and informants, and the least assertion of individuality or privacy is interpreted as a guilty secret that needs to be exposed.

Dickens reminds his readers that “our English reasons for vaunting our superiority to secrecy and spies are of very modern date,” and looks back in the novel to a time when the governments of both France and England were fully closed, decision-making structures, dependent on an invisible trade in secrets in their dealings both with each other and with their own citizens. We are introduced to this paranoid world from the novel's first pages, in which Dickens powerfully creates a mood of secret intrigue, and fear of exposure that feeds the atmosphere of almost every scene that follows: “The Dover mail was in its usual genial position that the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guard, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses” (p. 12). In the mail coach sits one of our principal characters, Mr. Lorry of Tellson's Bank (itself a repository of many secrets), on a clandestine mission whose purpose he will not divulge “anywhere or in any way,” except to trusty Jerry Cruncher in the form of a single enigmatic phrase: “Even I, safe as an Englishman, and even Tellson's, important as they are to France, credit, avoid all naming of the matter. I carry about me, not a scrap of writing openly referring to it. This is a secret service altogether. My credentials, entries, and memoranda, are all comprehended in the one line, ‘Re called to Life’ ” (pp. 29-30). Mr. Lorry's cautiousness is no fictional fancy. In the late-eighteenth century, interception of the mail by government agents was “nearly universal.” The London Public Record Office alone possesses more than two dozen volumes of intercepted dispatches for the years 1756 to 1763, while in France, surveillance was almost total: The notorious *cabinet noir* read *all* letters sent abroad through the French post (Neilson, *Go Spy the Land*, p. 101).

Even the background canvas of Dover is gloomy with secret business conducted in the dead of night. “A little fishing was done in the port, and a quantity of strolling about by night, and looking seaward . . . Small tradesmen, who did no business whatever, sometimes unaccountably realised large fortunes, and it was remarkable that nobody in the neighbourhood could endure a lamplighter” (p. 23). Spies, smugglers, pirates. And Dickens himself gets in on the act. The opening scenes of his novel take the form of a secret, a mystery revealed with almost unbearable slowness, the story of Mr. Lorry's client, who has been unjustly imprisoned in the Bastille for eighteen years, and who is now to be reunited with his daughter.

Later, outside the Old Bailey, we witness a public manifestation of informer culture as extraordinary to Dickens's contemporary readers as it is to us—the funeral procession of Roger Cly:

The crowd approached; they were bawling and hissing round a dingy hearse and dingy mourning coach, in which mourning coach there was only one mourner, dressed in the dingy trappings that were considered essential to the dignity of the position. The position appeared by no means to please him; however, with an increasing rabble surrounding the coach, deriding him, making grimaces at him, and incessantly groaning and calling out: “Yah! Spies! Tst! Yaha! Spies!” with many compliments to numerous and forcible to repeat. . . .

“What is it, brother? What’s it about?”

“I don’t know,” said the man. “Spies! Yaha! Tst! Spies!”

He asked another man. “Who is it?”

“I don’t know,” returned the man, clapping his hands to his mouth nevertheless, and vociferating with a surprising heat and with the greatest ardour, “Spies! Yaha! Tst, tst! Spi-ies!” (p. 155).

It is a typical Dickensian crowd, its passion directly proportional to its stupidity. Here they are duped entirely (Roger Cly lives!), but that such a crowd might be whipped up to mock a dead government agent signifies a state intelligence apparatus that is as ubiquitous and unpopular as it is incompetent. These are not the spies of John le Carré, let alone Ian Fleming, and *A Tale of Two Cities* is the most historically credible for that. Secret agents in the late-eighteenth century were mostly grasping mercenaries drawn from the criminal classes. “There were few Nathan Hales,” one historian records, and “for the most part it remained a venal business” (*Go Spy the Land*, p. 110).

But it is Paris, not London, that is most infested with spies. Dickens drew much historical detail for the Paris sections of the novel from Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s twelve-volume *Le Tableau de Paris* (1781-1788). In an essay entitled “Spies,” Mercier describes how, in the 1780s “the Parisian . . . was surrounded . . . by spies . . . it was the universal means of gathering secrets for the efficient use of the ministers.” Historians’ estimates for the numbers of government agents in Paris alone range up to three thousand. And as Barsad’s unsuccessful infiltration of Saint-Antoine shows, Parisians were equally on their guard against foreign spies. The atmosphere in the Defarges’ wine-shop when Barsad drops in reads like the script for a thousand twentieth-century films noir: “A figure entering at the door threw a shadow on Madame Defarge which she felt to be a new one. She laid down her knitting and began to pin her rose in her head-dress, before she looked at the figure. It was curious. The moment Madame Defarge took up the rose, the customers ceased talking, and began gradually to drop out of the wine-shop” (p. 179).

By the time Charles Darnay travels into revolutionary France, the atmosphere of deadly intrigue in the Saint-Antoine wine-shop has expanded to comprehend the entire country and its governance. The Revolutionary Convention has enacted its infamous Law of Suspects (September 1793), by which anyone might be accused by anyone, and now wields “universal watchfulness” as its supreme weapon of terror and control:

The universal watchfulness so encompassed him, that if he had been taken in a net, or were being forwarded to his destination in a cage, he could not have felt his freedom more completely gone.

This universal watchfulness not only stopped him on the highway twenty times in a stage, but retarded his progress twenty times in a day, by riding after him and taking him back, riding before him and stopping him by anticipation, riding with him and keeping him in charge (p. 245).

Darnay is in France to repudiate a *lettre de cachet*—a form of anonymous indictment admissible in French courts—brought against the manager of his former estate. But the sublime prosecutorial power

of “universal watchfulness” means that he will do no better than join his man in the Bastille. There, of course, he will find more spies, the so-called “sheep of the prisons,” whose existence points to the paranoid extremes of government surveillance during the Terror. Even those already condemned to death aren’t safe from its harassing gaze.

The principal victim of state secrecy in the novel is not, of course, Darnay or Gabelle, but Doctor Manette. The French term for solitary confinement, *en secret* (the title of the opening chapter of the third book), defines not merely the physical nature of Manette’s incarceration but its systematic meaning. When Dickens traveled abroad in 1842, he found to his horror that this sinister tradition of the ancien régime was being continued where he least expected to find it: in the cradle of American democracy, Philadelphia. Dickens was no bleeding heart when it came to the routine brutalization of inmates in nineteenth-century prisons; but the practice of solitary confinement tapped the deep wellsprings of his imaginative sympathy. His visit to the Philadelphia state prison is the most passionately rendered episode in his *American Notes*:

Over the head and face of every prisoner who comes into this melancholy house, a black hood is drawn; and in this dark shroud, an emblem of the curtain dropped between him and the living world, he is led to the cell from which he never again comes forth, until his whole term of imprisonment has expired. He never hears of wife or children; home or friends; the life or death of any single creature. He sees the prison officers, but with that exception he never looks upon a human countenance, or hears a human voice. He is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair (p. 69).

Here is the seed, almost two decades in germination, for *Doctor Manette* and *A Tale of Two Cities* (and its preliminary title, *Buried Alive*). While some of the scenes and characters of the novel creak with age, and read to us as stock melodrama, Dickens’s rendering of the effects of psychological torture on Doctor Manette is a terrific achievement, his use of the eighteenth-century associationist language of philosophers John Locke and David Hartley more subtle and gripping than a library’s worth of post-Freudian case studies. The effects of punitive isolation on the prisoner are so complete that he no longer knows his own name:

“Did you ask me for my name?”

“Assuredly I did.”

“One Hundred and Five, North Tower.”

“Is that all?”

“One Hundred and Five, North Tower.”

With a weary sound that was not a sigh, nor a groan, he bent to work again, until the silence was again broken.

“You are not a shoemaker by trade?” said Mr. Lorry, looking steadfastly at him. . . .

He lapsed away, even for minutes, ringing those measured changes on his hands the whole time. His eyes came slowly back, at last, to the face from which they had wandered; when they rested on it, he started, and resumed, in the manner of a sleeper that moment awake, reverting to a subject of last night.

“I asked leave to teach myself, and I got it with much difficulty after a long while, and I have made shoes ever since” (p. 45).

The Doctor's making and mending of shoes (another detail borrowed from the Philadelphia prison) takes the place of rage and remembering. This therapeutic act, ceaselessly repeated, transforms the angry young inmate who pronounced a curse on the heads of the Darnay family into the gentle man his daughter finds above the wine-shop in Saint Antoine, and ultimately into a hero of human charity in the killing fields of the Revolution.

For Doctor Manette, the love of family is the cure for the cruel effects of state secrecy. In the politics of *A Tale of Two Cities*, however, it is also the best means of preventing the tyranny of state surveillance in the first place. Paradoxically, Dickens's argument against the police state proceeds from a meditation on "secrecy" itself: not the manufacture of secrets by a paranoid government, but the secret at the core of human personality, the essential privacy of the individual that it is the duty of the modern, liberal state to protect. To make this key point, Dickens stands back from his narrative at the beginning of chapter 3, and speaks in his own voice:

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of the encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! . . . My friend is dead, my neighbour is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead; it is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality, and which I shall carry in mine to my life's end (p. 16).

This is a metaphysics of secrecy, a philosophical affirmation of what we might call "the right to privacy." It is consecrated by the private, wholly nontheatrical marriage of the hero and heroine in Soho, "in a neighbouring church, where no strange eyes looked on," and it opens up the positive social vision in the novel.

Dickens's urban social ideal—for a society made up of private families, unharassed by mob or state—glows most sentimentally in *A Christmas Carol*. The struggling Cratchits serve as Dickens's essential social unit: a Victorian family gathered together around the hearth, a charmed circle of retreat that is sanctuary against the humiliation and injustice heaped on its individual members in the harsh world "out there." In this overfamiliar story, Scrooge dominates the public world of "business" but has rejected family ties. He can only look in on the happy Cratchits from their threshold, first in wonder, then in a mortification of envy and regret.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the role of the Cratchits is played by the Manettes and their friends, the battered but unbroken community that reclaims its head from the dungeons of the French police state and retreats to its quiet suburban idyll at the northern outskirts of London: "a cool spot, staid but cheerful, a wonderful place for echoes, and a very harbour from the raging streets" (p. 94). The miniature social order they reconstitute for themselves in Soho is a kind of benign matriarchy presided over by the heroine, Lucie Manette: "Ever busily winding the golden thread which bound her husband, and her father, and herself, and her old directress and companion, in a life of quiet bliss" (p. 207). Lucie sat in the still house in the tranquilly resounding corner, listening to the echoing footsteps of years" (p. 207). Lucie embodies the miracle of domestic life: that its binding force is greater than the sum power of its individual members. Her love for her family is a self-replenishing energy, satisfying all as it sustains her:

many times her father had told her that he found her more devoted to him married (if that could be than single, and . . . many times her husband had said to her that no cares and duties seemed to divide

her love for him or her help to him, and asked her “What is the magic secret, my darling, of your being everything to all of us, as if there were only one of us, yet never seeming to be hurried, or have too much to do?” (p. 210).

This benevolent example extends to Miss Pross, a servant elevated to “companion” who eats with the family on Sundays and, in her devotion to her employers, reminds Mr. Lorry “that there is nothing [the world] better than the faithful service of the heart; so rendered and so free from any mercenary taint” (p. 98). This relationship between the classes in the Soho household is the real English guarantee against revolution. It is a fictional construction of the social goal Dickens once described to the Administrative Reform Association, one of the many liberal bodies he addressed in his career as an all-purpose public advocate: “It is stated that this Association sets class against class. Is this so? No, it finds class set against class, and seeks to reconcile them” (*Speeches*, p. 203).

But the Manettes’ trials have only just begun. While Lucie, surely Dickens’s blindest angel of goodness, directs the process of family healing from her “tranquil” corner of London, in the opposite corner, the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris, stands the unforgettable Madame Defarge, English fiction’s matriarch of horror. The single encounter between the two women is one of the most hair-raising episodes in the novel:

“Is that his child?” said Madame Defarge, stopping in her work for the first time, and pointing her knitting-needle at little Lucie as if it were the finger of Fate.

“Yes, madame,” answered Mr. Lorry; “this is our poor prisoner’s darling daughter, and only child.”

The shadow attendant on Madame Defarge and her party seemed to fall so threatening and dark on the child, that her mother instinctively kneeled on the ground beside her, and held her to her breast. The shadow attendant on Madame Defarge and her party seemed then to fall, threatening and dark, on both the mother and the child (p. 266).

Madame Defarge, is a supreme Dickens creation, often likened to Lady Macbeth; but she outdoes even this daunting model with her diabolical mix of patient cunning and shocking malevolence. As with Dickens’s account of the Revolution in general, the Madame is more mythic than strictly historical. She is one of the Furies of Hell:

There were many women at that time, upon whom the time laid a dreadfully disfiguring hand; but there was not one among them more to be dreaded than this ruthless woman, now taking her way alone the streets. . . . imbued from her childhood with a brooding sense of wrong, and an inveterate hatred of a class, opportunity had developed her into a tigress. She was absolutely without pity. If she had even had the virtue in her, it had quite gone out of her.

It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her, that his wife was to be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live (pp. 358-359).

Liberty becomes a problematic ideology when it is embodied by a she-demon like Madame Defarge. She represents how apparently modern, progressive social forces of “liberation” can be hijacked by the primal energies of bloodlust and tribal revenge. To the early-twenty-first century reader, she is a chillingly familiar figure, a prototype for the warrior ideologues of our own history, from Pol Pot to Osama Bin Laden: Unappeasable and merciless, her response to legitimate grievance is an entire illegitimate appetite for blood and destruction. Even when the devastating crimes wrought on her



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