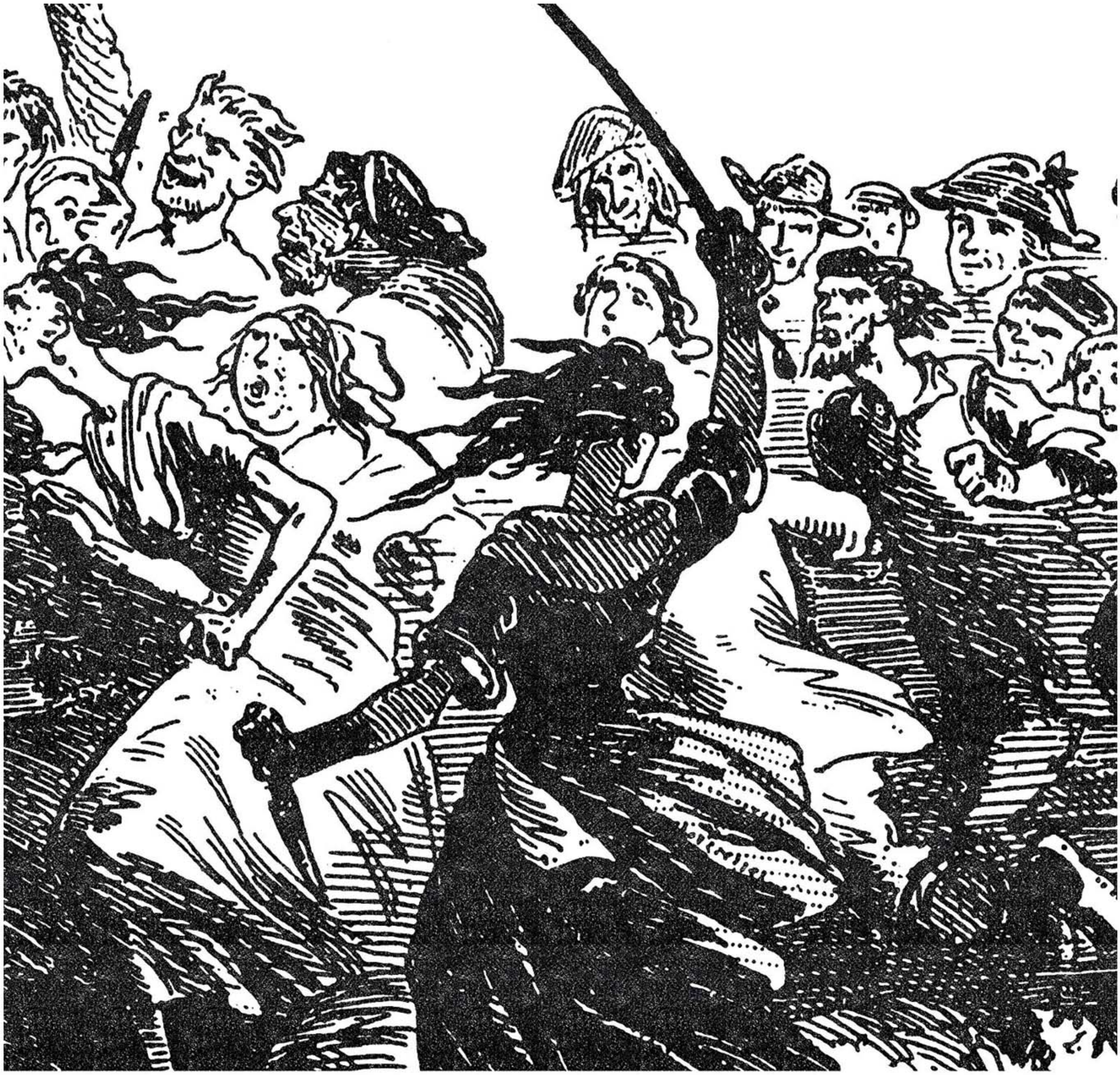

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CHARLES DICKENS

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

PENGUIN CLASSICS

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

CHARLES DICKENS was born in Portsmouth on 7 February 1812, the second of eight children. Dickens's childhood experiences were similar to those depicted in *David Copperfield*. His father, who was a government clerk, was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was briefly sent to work in a blacking warehouse at the age of twelve. He received little formal education, but taught himself shorthand and became a reporter of parliamentary debates for the *Morning Chronicle*. He began to publish sketches in various periodicals, which were subsequently republished as *Sketches by Boz*. *The Pickwick Papers* was published in 1836–7 and after a slow start became a publishing phenomenon and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret of his success was the method of cheap serial publication he adopted; thereafter, all Dickens's novels were first published in serial form. He began *Oliver Twist* in 1837, followed by *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41). After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) Dickens set off for America; he went full of enthusiasm for the young republic but, in spite of a triumphant reception, he returned disillusioned. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842). *A Christmas Carol*, the first of the hugely popular *Christmas Books*, appeared in 1843, while *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which included a fictionalized account of his American travels, was first published over the period 1843–4. During 1844–6 Dickens travelled abroad and he began *Dombey and Son* while in Switzerland. This and *David Copperfield* (1849–50) were more serious in theme and more carefully planned than his early novels. In later works, such as *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1857), Dickens's social criticism became more radical and his comedy more savage. In 1850 Dickens started the weekly periodical *Household Words*, succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*; in these he published *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860–61). Dickens's health was failing during the 1860s and the physical strain of the public readings which he began in 1858 hastened his decline, although *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) retained some of his best comedy. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was never completed and he died on 9 June 1870. Public grief at his death was considerable and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

RICHARD MAXWELL took a doctorate in English literature from the University of Chicago. The author of *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (1992), and editor of *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002), he has also written extensively on the historical novels of John Cowper Powys. He is now working on a study of historical fiction between the seventeenth century and the present. He teaches in the Comparative Literature and English departments at Yale University.

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

RICHARD MAXWELL

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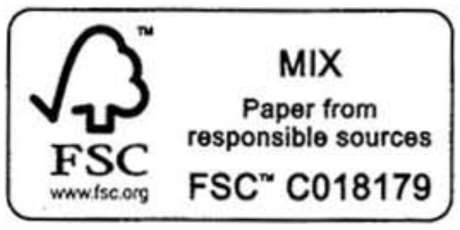

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INTRODUCTION

In an early chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Mr Lorry walks towards Soho to visit his friends the Manettes. 'The quiet lodgings of Doctor Manette were in a quiet street-corner not far from Soho-square . . . It was a cool spot, staid but cheerful, a wonderful place for echoes, and a very harbour from the raging streets' (II.6). While there, Lorry converses with the housekeeper Miss Pross, who informs him that 'crowds and multitudes of people' have been turning up on the doorstep, apparently as suitors of Manette's daughter Lucie. Lorry looks all evening for the 'hundreds of people' whom he has been led to expect, but only a few appear; the 'hundreds' in question remain only echoes, 'echoes of other steps that never came'.

There are occasions in *A Tale* when hundreds, even thousands, of people do appear. The novel describes several scenes from the French Revolution which would call (and every so often have called) on the full resources of a major Hollywood studio. Furthermore, of all Dickens's books, with the exception of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), this one has the clearest claim to belong to that ambitious genre, historical fiction. Nonetheless, it remains basically a small-scale work that somehow succeeds in giving a larger-than-life impression of itself. Those who recall *A Tale* after having read it long ago are especially liable to think of it as featuring vast, howling mobs and dizzying epic scenes; the intimacy of the story, its frequent concentration on understated incidents involving just a few characters, is often forgotten. Like the 'quiet street-corner' where Dr Manette resides, *A Tale* seems to function as a kind of echo-chamber; it is an intimate book which somehow evokes the epic presence of crowds and the vast movements of history.

Something of the novel's intimacy and compression are implicit in the circumstances of its publication. Dickens composed *A Tale* for his newly established weekly *All the Year Round*. The first

instalment appeared in the first number of the periodical, on 30 April 1859. Soon after this, he wrote to his friend John Forster: 'The small portions [of the novel in the magazine] drive me frantic', and in another letter he added this plaintive remark: 'Nothing but the interest of the subject, and the pleasure of striving with the difficulty of the form of treatment – nothing in the way of mere money, I mean – could else repay the time and trouble of the incessant condensation.'[1] These complaints continued throughout the book's composition. Dickens seems to have had a standing joke with Thomas Carlyle about the tiny segments in *All the Year Round*, calling them 'teaspoons'. Moreover, he took good care that larger portions should appear simultaneously in a form associated with him since *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7): 32-page monthly parts, each with two accompanying illustrations. As he explained to Forster, he thus got his 'old standing with [his] old public, and the advantage (very necessary in this story)' of an audience who would read the book in more than those insufficient teaspoons.[2]

After *A Tale* had achieved book form, no one needed, ever again, to sip it even in the more capacious tablespoons of the monthly parts; the complete story was available for consumption at one sitting, should a reader desire. All the same, the novel betrays or even advertises its own 'incessant' condensations, its 'terseness and closeness of construction'.[3] In the long run, moreover, the concision of the weekly parts (a grinding limitation, according to the author) is recuperated and clarified by the concision of the novel as a whole. Some sense of this turnabout is evident already in the Preface to the first volume edition, where Dickens juxtaposes his recently completed novel with Carlyle's *The French Revolution*: 'It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr CARLYLE's wonderful book' (see Appendix III). This tribute cuts several ways. In form, tone, conception and sheer bulk, Carlyle's 'wonderful book' of 1837 anticipates the great novels of Dickens's middle period, such as *Bleak House* (1852–3).[4] On the other hand, though *A Tale* borrows extensively from particular passages in *The French Revolution*, it asks to

be judged by a different standard, one which honours above all concision, reticence and implication rather than the grander virtues typically associated with Dickens and Carlyle alike. Dickens's gesture of setting his own work next to *The French Revolution* emphasizes both that his novel is more modest in its ambitions than is his friend's weighty history, and also that, by one means or another, the *Tale*, an echo-chamber of a novel, has its own special means of getting a big effect in a limited space. If Dickens in any sense competes with Carlyle, he does so on his own especially chosen ground.

There are many indications in *A Tale* that we should acknowledge concision as a good rather than merely accepting it as a necessity. The book is unusually dependent (even for Dickens) on code words like 'Recalled to Life', which stand in for intricate complexes of ideas and images; on short, pungent scenes; on the use of a few characters to perform many functions; on temporal ellipses (the earliest event occurs in December 1757, the latest at the beginning of 1794 – 'like a French drama', according to Dickens's memorandum book); on a drastic reduction of the French Revolution to a few well-known crises (the taking of the Bastille, the Terror); and on an effort to make plot do the work of dialogue and introspection. As the novelist explained, it was his intent to make 'a *picturesque* story', i.e. one which would reveal character through action rather than through lengthy explanations, either by characters or the narrator.[5] In addition, the genre of the tale is by definition succinct. Given the variety and importance of these indicators, it is not altogether surprising to discover that *A Tale*'s unlikely hero, Sydney Carton, is himself a professional condenser. His 'glib' associate, the barrister Stryver, 'had not that faculty of extracting the essence from a heap of statements, which is among the most striking and necessary of the advocate's accomplishments', yet once Carton starts to assist him, 'The more business he got, the greater his power seemed to grow of getting at its pith and marrow . . .' In his nocturnal meditations, Carton makes 'a compact repast' for Stryver, 'boiling [it] down' to the bare minimum needed for understanding (II.5). In the courtroom, correspondingly, a whisper, gesture or look from Carton can impel Stryver to a lengthy and (by most standards) overly demonstrative

performance, whose gist has been relayed to him in an instant: Stryver, so to speak, provides the echoes of which Carton's insights are the original cause. Even in its most expansive moments, the expressive sympathies of *A Tale* lie with Carton's nuanced, gestural communications, where much is expressed, or perhaps just implied, in a moment.

If the partnership of Carton and Stryver is indeed the appropriate test-case, then condensation can produce sustained intellectual clarity, a sure feeling for essentials and a perfect understanding of how to stir one's audience. Given the preoccupations of *A Tale*, the act of condensing, of miniaturizing and abridging without harm, has one further advantage. As Albert Hutter once observed, Dickens's novel of the Revolution links the demands of the family with those of the nation; the author is committed to superimposing these two different standards of value.[6] At times, the book seems to be a nightmare of what would happen were domestic intimacy to be enforced, or enacted, on a mass scale. If all citizens had to be linked by fraternity ('or death', as the motto has it), the integrity of the household would be in danger of annihilation by a new and deeply oppressive national family. At other times, the nation almost seems an incidental effect of familial intrigue, as when the Defarges take the Bastille seemingly in order to find Manette's testament of hatred against the Evrémondes.[7] For the most part – it is no mean accomplishment – the novel helps us imagine both these extremes (and the territory between them) with considerable clarity and power. It is able to do so not because it is short but because its concision allows the novelist great manoeuvrability, particularly when he changes the scale of his narrative, in one direction or another. *A Tale*'s combination of reticence and intimacy makes the seesaw movement between nation and family comprehensible, not to say plausible. The characters keep struggling with the impingements of a large-scale, mostly uncontrollable, historical process. History leaks into everyday life, almost invisibly; domestic tragedy has public reverberations. The miniaturized movements of *A Tale* give this double process substance.

A Tale's condensations begin with the title itself, an economical bit of summary and of thematic clarification. Dickens had played

with other possibilities – 'Memory Carton', 'The Golden Thread', 'The Doctor of Beauvais' – but when he hit on his final idea, he announced it to Forster as though it were a sure thing. He will tell a tale – a short thing, by its nature – and tell it about two contrasting metropolises. The cities in question are, of course, London and Paris. London is steadied by old-fashioned habits of business (personified in the figure of Mr Lorry, as well as in that 'honest tradesman' Jerry Cruncher), by the rule of law (Darnay is acquitted of treason, despite a general bias against him), and by the relative self-control and prosperity of the working classes (Jerry Cruncher's conscience operates on him constantly, especially when he is digging up corpses for sale to medical schools; he is the least terrifying Resurrection Man in literature, especially when compared with the most notorious practitioner of the trade in mid Victorian literature, G. W. M. Reynolds's Anthony Tidkins).[8] Though London has crowds, they are carnivalesque gatherings which let off steam and then abruptly disperse: Dickens makes no mention of the destructive Gordon Riots, the subject of his earlier historical novel (*Barnaby Rudge*). As a consequence, Londoners are able to pursue private lives characterized by tranquillity and happiness, as well as by those polite repressions necessary to any civilized society. Dr Manette's Soho retreat is the leafy setting for one such urban idyll. In Paris, by contrast, society has become a great public stage on which the conflicts of history are acted out in front of a governing – and ungovernable – mass audience. No one can retreat from this tireless public gaze; *citoyennes tricoteuses*, the knitting women led by Mme Defarge, perform the crucial double function of *denouncing* those who defy the Revolution and *witnessing* their punishment. Thus they create a powerful – and often lethal – public realm within which the Revolution recognizes, sustains and ultimately destroys itself.[9] In the fundamentally private city of London, people not only keep secrets from each other, but are mysteries to themselves – as Dickens famously proposes towards the beginning of *A Tale*; in the public city of Revolutionary Paris, such mysteries are not only revealed to a wide critical gaze but prove to have drastic social and historical consequences.[10] Each city is a highly stylized construct, creating possibilities of fulfilment or sacrifice

impossible in its double across the Channel. Without the Paris of *A Tale*, Carton's life would have come to a wasteful and shameful end; without London – a city hauntingly sheltered by a great plane tree – Manette and his family would have had no idyllic retreat where they could gradually remake their broken lives.

The novelist's heavy emphasis on contrasts between London and Paris does much to shape his reading of the Revolution. By the same token, this reading has often seemed elusive; it can certainly be interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Writing on 'The Guillotine' in 1843, the conservative critic J. W. Croker declared: 'The whole French Revolution, from the taking of the Bastille to the overthrow of the *Empire*, was in fact one long Reign of Terror.'[11] This boldly declared position – reworked in our own time by revisionist historians of the Revolution, such as François Furet – is sometimes attributed to Dickens himself. After all, the shuttling of *A Tale* between London and Paris has the effect of abridging the Revolution; by a process of exclusion, Dickens insists that a few vital points of reference will, at least for his purposes, do it justice. (See the Timeline and its opening note in the present edition.) *A Tale* not only emphasizes the ruthlessness of the Terror, but chooses to concentrate almost exclusively on that epoch. We are at the taking of the Bastille, along with the Defarges, and witness, soon after, the bizarre executions of Foulon and his son-in-law, a premonition of much yet to come; then, on our next visit to Paris, we find ourselves in the midst of the September massacres, followed (after a quick jump in time) by those bloody Revolutionary tribunals which sent so many people to their deaths. Nonetheless, for all his horror at the murderousness of the crowd, Dickens is no Croker. He ignores the counterrevolutionary fervour of the Vendée, a theme associated then and now with conservative interpretations.[12] Avoiding the demonologies established by Tory critics of the Revolution, he betrays little interest in the legendary figures of the Terror: there is no Danton, no Robespierre, no Marat. Dickens's Revolution is not shaped by great men of unparalleled evil and bloodthirstiness, or by small men who thought they were great but have lost control. Instead, it is created almost exclusively by the lowly Defarges and their kind, emerging from radical working-class

neighbourhoods, such as the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Furthermore, these people seek a revenge with which the novel elaborately prepares us to sympathize. The early French chapters chronicle the foolishness and wickedness of the old regime and narrate one early act of vengeance (the murder of a particularly cruel aristocrat); from the initial picture of Paris (I.5), where a broken wine-cask seems to drip blood and hunger is written on every face, the eventual rising of peasants and of the urban crowd is made to seem inevitable. Revenge becomes an abstract principle of ethics: as indeed it was, for such spokesmen of the Terror as Robespierre and Saint-Just.[13]

Dickens's picture of a certain though horrible revenge is hardly original; he takes a position on the Revolution which had been available in England as early as the 1790s. In his *Travels in France*, Arthur Young, for instance, wrote that:

> It is impossible to justify the excesses of the people on their taking up arms; they were certainly guilty of cruelties; it is idle to deny the facts . . . But is it really the people to whom we are to impute the whole? – Or to their oppressors who had kept them so long in a state of bondage? He who chooses to be served by slaves, and by ill-treated slaves, must know that he holds both his property and life by a tenure far different from those who prefer the service of well treated freemen; and he who dines to the music of groaning sufferers must not, in the moment of insurrection, complain that his daughters are ravished and then destroyed and that his sons' throats are cut.[14]

Dickens too emphasizes the complicity of the upper orders in their own downfall; he too admits and often highlights the horrors of the Revolution, while taking, possibly, a subliminal pleasure in them. There is often a lurking satisfaction in seeing someone else get his just deserts, especially when we watch as helpless witnesses and so lack the more obvious kinds of moral complicity. Like Young, furthermore, Dickens appeals to the prudential sentiments of the middle classes in his own country – and may indirectly be arguing for the extension of the franchise, according to a plan devised by the novel's dedicatee, John Russell.[15] At the same time, he manifests none of Croker's emotional investment in the Old Regime, nor does

he share Carlyle's deep longing for masterful figures of authority and his sense that the destructiveness of the Revolution was in fact a *creative* negation, contributing to human progress rather than just delaying it.[16] The narrower and more limited emphasis, both in Dickens and in earlier English thinkers such as Young, is on a cause–effect relation between a corrupt set of social practices and what is seen as its direct result. 'There could have been no such Revolution, if all laws, forms, and ceremonies, had not first been so monstrously abused, that the suicidal vengeance of the Revolution was to scatter them all to the winds' (III.9). These are the words of a determined social reformer, set on promoting improvements which will make revolutions unnecessary.

Dickens's study of cause and effect turns not only on references to a hungry, oppressed French people, but on the evocation of several familiar topics. The first of these is the legend of the Bastille. Cardinal Richelieu had gradually turned this royal fortress (adjacent to the Faubourg Saint-Antoine) into a state prison; Louis XIV used it to incarcerate those he deemed his particular enemies, such as his superintendent of finance, Nicholas Fouquet, and – according to a rumour spread by Voltaire and others – the Man in the Iron Mask. Even before Louis's death in 1715, the Bastille had become a semi-mythical site of terror and oppression. A painstaking study by two German cultural historians shows that its fearsome reputation was further enhanced in a series of widely read memoirs. These 'scandal histories' by former prisoners share certain characteristics. The narrator usually stresses his (supposedly) noble origin and his promising career before his arrest. He shows that he was arrested by an unjust conspiracy. The conspirators use *lettres de cachet*, warrants which were sometimes left blank so that their possessors could commit to prison the individuals of their choice. The prisoner finds himself in a dark, unhealthy cell, where the names of other victims of despotism are frequently written on the walls (or where, perhaps, he writes his own name). He is tortured mentally as well as physically. Either he heroically escapes or he is secretly released (and typically goes into exile, where, in fact, he can compose and publish his memoirs).[17] True or untrue, accurate or exaggerated, such tales not

only became a central feature of pre-Revolutionary polemic, but also bequeathed a rich range of motifs to the Gothic novel and to the historical romance as shaped by Alexandre Dumas. *A Tale* also draws on them extensively; except for the claim of noble origin, each of the features enumerated above figures in the tale of Dr Manette, the former Bastille prisoner around whose fate Dickens's novel is largely organized.

The second legend evoked by Dickens is *droit du seigneur* or *droit de cuissage*, the supposed right of the feudal lord to spend the first night after the wedding with the bride of one of his vassals. This subject was highly current during the later eighteenth century. For instance, in 1773, a somewhat absurd legal spat over whether the seigneur of Salency got to choose the Rose-Girl (a kind of beauty queen) in a village festival, and whether he then got to sit beside her in church, blew up into a national controversy; lawyers working for the villagers (and against the over-eager lord) evoked the threat of *droit du seigneur*.[18] A decade later, Beaumarchais returned to this subject, making it a crucial feature of his play, *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784); he thus reinforced a symbol no less essential than the Bastille to pre-Revolutionary polemics. More surprisingly, the controversy over *droit du seigneur* revived in France during the mid nineteenth century, just a few years before *A Tale* was written; the supposed prevalence of *droit du seigneur* during and after the Middle Ages became a bone of contention between anti-clerical liberals and neo-reactionary Catholics. As Alain Boureau has demonstrated, the debate became especially intense in 1874–5, then continued with sporadic vigour for some thirty years and 'contributed greatly to the construction of the idea of a Middle Ages essentially different from other epochs and a foil or model for them'.[19] *Droit du seigneur* was depicted at length by several historical novelists: G. P. R. James, in *The Jacquerie, or The Lady and the Page* (1842) and Eugène Sue, in *Mysteries of the People* (1847–59). Few contemporary readers can have been completely surprised to discover, two-thirds of the way through *A Tale*, that Dr Manette's imprisonment was due to his knowledge of a family scandal stemming from the exercise of a lord's unwanted sexual claims on a recently-married

peasant woman. As arbitrary imprisonment had become the exemplary abuse of monarchical power, so *droit du seigneur* was the exemplary abuse of aristocratic power; *A Tale*'s plot links these two formative transgressions.

The *droit du seigneur* probably never existed; at the very least, it was not a live practice during the eighteenth century and the evidence for its medieval existence lies in the close interpretation of obscure documents. In addition, the tales of the Bastille and of *lettres de cachet* which circulated in the late eighteenth century were occasionally distorted by rumour or self-promotion. The Bastille's use as an instrument of state power had peaked in the reign of the Sun King, not in those of Louis XV or XVI, though the formidable old fortress did continue to house political prisoners; *lettres de cachet* also declined, under the influence of reforming ministers appointed by Louis XVI, though they were not completely eliminated until the Revolution. By emphasizing this pair of themes, Dickens strayed into a particularly ambiguous territory somewhere between fact and legend. Moreover, he did so wilfully. In manuscript, he changed the story of the wronged peasant woman from a tale of seduction to one of forced sex (and, effectively, of *droit du seigneur*);[20] he drew substantially from Young's appendix to *Travels in France* (called 'The Revolution in France'), but ignored Young's prominent comment that the abuse of *lettres de cachet* was heavily exaggerated. Dickens understood full well that there were only seven prisoners in the Bastille when it was finally liberated – this slightly farcical detail, borrowed from Carlyle, reappears in *A Tale* – but chose to organize the novel around the fate of a Bastille prisoner whom he had invented himself and who represents an idealistic martyr to liberty, unlike any of the actual prisoners.

There are several possible explanations for Dickens's insistence on a powerful evocation of two somewhat slippery anti-absolutist or anti-feudal motifs. In dwelling on old or even half-imaginary abuses, abuses which had in any case declined well before the Revolution, he chose to indulge a certain condescension towards times past. Many comments in *A Tale* suggest the perspective of a mid Victorian who believed perhaps too ardently in his own century's superiority to its

predecessors. Furthermore, the novelist was deeply attracted to motifs that belonged to myth as much as to history; it is out of such hybrid materials that a historical romance or historical 'tale' is made, and we might not want to be excessively literal about proof, given the genre in which Dickens was working. A third consideration, however, may account best of all for the novel's somewhat elusive relation to social fact. Edward Bulwer-Lytton apparently complained to Dickens that the outrageous feudal abuses chronicled in *A Tale* were anachronistic. Dickens's first response was that such things did occur quite near to the time of the Revolution, even if not in the 1780s, and that he could prove it. (This defence ignores the fact that his novel made such abuses seem not just possible but representative.) Then he proceeded to a more interesting claim: 'Surely, when the new philosophy was the talk of the salons and the slang of the hour, it is not unreasonable or unallowable to suppose a nobleman wedded to the old cruel ideas, and representing the time going out, as his nephew [Charles Darnay] represents the time going in.'[21] In other words, the novelist had worked out an expressive temporal abridgement. The cruel Evrémondes are figures from a dying past, whose period of cultural dominance had occurred long before the Revolution. Darnay, a progressive aristocrat who cuts off most ties with his family and insists on making his own way in the world, is a figure of the future. Our ability to apprehend a long-term historical process is intensified by Dickens's decision to juxtapose these characters. Even if this stretches the facts, the creation of a half-imaginary cultural moment remains justifiable; such a moment expresses historical truth rather than literally replicates it.

Within the condensations of historical time provided by *A Tale*, the lives of Dickens's characters play themselves out. The novelist is particularly concerned with three men, all obsessed with the same dreamy figure of desire, Lucie Manette. Each of these men illustrates how the book's economies and abridgements are used to expressive or analytical purposes: Dr Manette's character is revealed much more fully through actions than by the often extraneous means of dialogue or introspection; Charles Darnay's ambiguous historical guilt is conveyed through a crucial historical ellipsis; and Sydney Carton's

prophetic powers are released within a tiny or even nonexistent moment. Attending to these nuances of treatment (perhaps partly unexpected, given the novelist's love of the grand melodramatic gesture, visible from the very highest galleries), one learns how to read *A Tale* on its own miniaturized terms.

Dr Manette is the former Bastille prisoner and Lucie's father. He is said to come from Beauvais; Dickens's early thought of calling his book 'The Doctor of Beauvais' is perhaps meant to evoke that town's ancient radical associations (it was here that the medieval *Jacquerie* was concentrated). The Doctor is originally committed to the Bastille on the strength of a *lettre de cachet*, after he has drawn official attention to the wrongdoings of an aristocratic family, the Evrémondes. Manette is imprisoned in 1757, during the reign of Louis XV; he is released in 1775, apparently on the accession of Louis XVI (when, in fact, more enlightened ministers did come to power and, among other reforms, free Bastille inmates). Drawing on an anecdote in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1782–8), Dickens presents the recently released Manette as so traumatized by his long incarceration that he is lost in the outside world. Manette's near-madness is allayed only by the appearance of Lucie, brought over from London to take charge of him. When she arrives in Paris, he is immured in a dark room something like his Bastille cell, engaged in fashioning a lady's shoe. Gradually his attention is deflected from shoe to daughter. He becomes almost completely dependent on Lucie, who not only resembles and recalls her mother but enables Manette to forget his Parisian sufferings. It is a considerable trial for Manette when Charles Darnay asks his permission to court Lucie. Not only does Manette feel jealous at the appearance of this rival for his daughter's affection; he discovers that Darnay is an Evrémonde. This double burden is too much for him. When Lucie and Charles leave on their honeymoon, Manette almost immediately reverts to making shoes, in the process losing all sense of where or who he is. As the daughter replaced the shoes, so the shoes replace the daughter. The effect is almost that of a fetish, though it is less shoes in themselves than the process of making them – of bringing them into being, busily and apparently meaninglessly, while their possible possessor is somewhere else –

which possesses Manette in his moments of abandon and abandonment.

Physically, Lucie resembles Ellen Ternan, the eighteen-year-old actress with whom Dickens had recently taken up, while separated from his unfortunate and much-victimized wife. The problem of an older man's attraction to a younger woman – young enough to be his daughter – is compounded, in *A Tale*, by a sort of implied emotional incest. Dickens does not fully imagine Lucie's relation with any of her suitors. He suggests rather than discusses her relation to her father, but the suggestion is framed with considerable precision. Though Manette is separated from his shoemaking equipment before his daughter's return, we are now fully aware – perhaps more so than he is himself – of his struggle to keep his sanity, of his unusually intense need for his daughter and of his sternly repressed hatred for her husband. In the historical-fictional scheme of *A Tale*, Manette's doubled anger at Darnay cannot be completely articulated until the Bastille is overrun and liberated. Defarge, Manette's old servant, finds his former master's confession and curse on his persecutors hidden in his cell; the confession can be used against Darnay after the latter is lured back to Paris and put on trial as a former aristocrat and a member of the very family who wronged Manette. This claustrophobic tangle is in one sense a convention of melodrama; there are hundreds of nineteenth-century plots that develop in roughly these terms, with everybody turning out to have known everybody else in some previous dispensation. What distinguishes this one is its attempt to distinguish between a character's surface benignity and, just beneath that surface, his irrational, ungovernable rage. As long as Manette, Lucie and Darnay linger in London, city of private life and of civilized repression, the father can just barely tolerate his daughter's marriage without going permanently mad or becoming, once more, a maker of shoes. In Paris, city of public revelations, the Bastille prisoner's confession will be read back to him before a crowd which yells for Darnay's execution. The mob articulates an anger which Manette, according to his own lights, should not be feeling. He insists throughout the earlier Parisian scenes that he wants to save Darnay and that, in fact, he *has* saved him. However, once the

Bastille yields up its secret, Manette's own unarticulated desires can be used against him and against the benign intentions which he persistently articulates. It comes to seem that the furtive, unconscious shoemaker has produced not only that forlorn lady's shoe in the latest style, but also 'the echoes of all the footsteps' (II.6) that finally receive their embodiment in the judging, avenging crowd. Despite himself, Manette denounces Darnay, and denounces him more effectively than anyone else could have done.

The second crucial male character in the novel is Darnay, not only Manette's son-in-law but, in effect, his rival. Though he lacks vividness, this character remains a figure of considerable interest: he is this novel's central embodiment of the problem of the aristocracy in the French Revolution. In a famously hostile review, Fitzjames Stephens complained that Dickens had unfairly represented the old regime as composed of wicked aristocrats.[22] This criticism is not without its point; for reasons suggested above, the Evrémonde brothers occupy a great deal of psychic space in the reader's mind. At the same time, a dense but compact sketch at the beginning of Book II, Chapter 7 pinpoints another side of the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy; here Dickens writes in terms that harmonize well not only with his immediate sources, such as Carlyle, Mercier, Bulwer-Lytton and Dumas, but also with late twentieth-century work on the cultural history of the Revolution. In this important scene-setting passage, *A Tale* emphasizes the experimental liberalism of great court figures and the curious connections between radical thought and occultism:[23] Dickens's 'Monseigneur' is lazy about public affairs, but intermarries with the bourgeoisie and is a great patron of 'Unbelieving Philosophers' and 'Unbelieving Chemists', as well as of mystic sects. It is not the avant-garde 'Monseigneur' but his social and intellectual inferior, the ruthlessly backwards 'Monsieur' (the younger Evrémonde brother), who commits active atrocities against the lower classes (seducing their daughters, killing their children heedlessly with his coach wheels). And as Dickens takes pains to demonstrate, Monsieur is *persona non grata* in the salons of the great: no one among the Philosophers, Chemists and rich middle-class tax-farmers, much less Monseigneur himself, will take any heed of him. Dickens

then, asks us to imagine an intellectually advanced elite largely incapable of day-to-day governance and management; at the same time, he suggests, there were regressive figures such as Monsieur, for the most part living in faraway parts of the countryside. In different ways, both kinds of aristocrat helped lay the ground for the Revolution.[24]

Darnay is Monsieur's nephew, but also, just as importantly, has intellectual and temperamental links to Monseigneur. On the one hand, he is the heir of the evil Evrémondes, on the other an admirer of George Washington (another character who combines democratic and aristocratic impulses). Unlike previous Evrémondes, he is full of good intentions towards others. At first, he also displays significantly greater practical abilities than Monseigneur and his kind; after all, he is able to make a living in England while pursuing the unremunerative trade of modern language tutoring. However, Darnay is a less competent figure than he initially seems. *A Tale*'s strangest narrative omission does much to highlight his problematic treatment of his continental heritage. He visits his wicked uncle in the French countryside; immediately after his visit, the uncle is killed by an avenger from the lower classes. Though Darnay and his relative discussed the question of inheritance, we are allowed to hear nothing of his reaction to the uncle's death nor of his feelings on receiving the latter's estates; this topic – particularly charged, since the uncle is his father's twin, and since his death is described by Dickens as a sort of symbolic parricide – is abruptly banished from the book. Much later, it turns out that Darnay has failed to make any sustained effort at reforming the estates; instead, he has handed them over to a subordinate, who is given benign but inadequate short-term advice about how to proceed in his treatment of local farmers. Dickens suggests – uneasily, almost flailingly – that Darnay is at fault; the reasons for his failure are not completely clarified, though they seem to be connected with his desire to separate himself from the past. The result, in any case, is that when he is called back to Paris to answer for himself and his representative about the estates, he goes out of a bad conscience rather than out of good judgement. If Manette is shaped by subliminal, purposely forgotten anger, then Darnay is

shaped by subliminal, purposely repressed guilt: by a destructive act of forgetting represented in the very structure of *A Tale*. This guilt, moreover, is just as deeply rooted, perhaps even more so, than Manette's hidden rages. Having found one another as friends, the two of them rediscover each other as enemies, with the Doctor, however unwillingly, pushed to the side of the mob, and Darnay, however unwillingly, pushed to the side of Monsieur and Monseigneur alike. In his famous *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53), Jules Michelet had declared that this epoch in the history of France freed the nation from the ideology of blood-guilt imposed by the Christian doctrine of Original Sin.[25] Much occupied during the 1850s with Gothic plots that revolved around family curses, Dickens suggests that the Revolution imposed its own ideology of blood-guilt – death to aristocrats or to their descendants – and did so horribly but not altogether unjustly. Darnay is drawn to the Terror as ships to the Loadstone Rock of the *Arabian Nights*. He is drawn to it, we are led to infer, partly because he cannot hide from himself that he belongs to the Evrémondes, that cursed race, and partly because he has had to keep this information secret: now it will be proclaimed, now he will face the burden of his inheritance.

The third member of the trio is Sydney Carton. He is not only the great intellectual condenser within this novel; he is also the most reticent, the most secretive, of its characters. Suffering from an inexplicable melancholy, he is said to lead a life of 'sloth and sensuality' (II.13); his sensual excesses are apparently abominable. Darnay attempts to flee a family and thus start his life anew; Carton, conversely, attempts to join a family and thus start *his* life anew. In a strained conversation between the two of them, shortly after Darnay's wedding-day, Carton asks that he should be 'permitted to come and go as a privileged person' in the household (II.20). Dickens observes that he does not use this privilege often; when he shows up, however, he is to be accepted as a feature of the establishment. Off the premises, Carton continues to pursue his decadent ways; while visiting the Darnay ménage, he seeks his own periodic form of redemption by worshipping Lucie as though she were a remote, pure light to which he could look up. At the same time, he knows

that this idealized domesticity will not be enough to save him from himself. It is significant that he hears the footsteps of the Revolution approaching before any of the others do, and, moreover, welcomes them; his sacrifice already prepares itself, though he does not yet understand the form it will take. Like Manette, he is shown to dislike Darnay practically from the moment that the latter appears within the narrative (see the interesting, though largely implied, narrative of II.4); like Manette, he will try to save Darnay from the guillotine, but will succeed where the Doctor fails.

Dickens was especially proud of the chapters in which Carton, a double for his rival, arranged to be executed in his stead. The idea is not an original one. As the Preface to *A Tale* notes, the novelist had recently acted in a play which featured the same plot-twist (Wilkie Collins's *The Frozen Deep*, on the rigours of Arctic exploration); furthermore, there were at least two previous Victorian works about the French Revolution in which a similar switch of victims was effected: Dickens knew both of them.[26] On the other hand, it is not so much the switch that we are expected to find impressive as Carton's combination of stoic reserve and expansive eloquence during his last hours. He atones for the sins of the Evrémondes, but his atonement can be effective only if it is secret. In his death, therefore, he tries to combine Parisian political theatre with London discretion. On the London side, he remains reserved to the end, thus giving the Manettes time to escape; at the same time, he delivers – or is imagined to deliver – his well-known final speech. As presented by Dickens, this memorable moment of blessing and of prophecy becomes not only a response to the French Revolution but a quintessential product of it.

A generation before *A Tale* was written, the dramatist Heinrich von Kleist had analysed the French Revolution's tendency to evolve out of improvised verbal responses, ripostes under pressure by such figures as the orator Mirabeau; history, Kleist suggested, could turn on the twitch of a lip or on ambiguous play with a buttonhole: history is like a stutter which miraculously turns into an epigram. Densely written – and thus susceptible to an unusually close reading – Carton's speech has something of this desperate, exploratory, yet highly formal

quality.[27] In some ways, his valediction can be judged against the last words (or last silences) of others executed during the Revolution. Dickens has already alluded to Louis XVI, whose message from the scaffold had been purposely drowned out by the roll of drums, and to a Girondin who had committed suicide before he could be arrested, but was decapitated anyway. Searching for analogues, for possible points of comparison, the novelist now evokes a third instance: 'One of the most remarkable sufferers by the same axe – a woman – had asked at the foot of the same scaffold, not long before, to be allowed to write down the thoughts that were inspiring her. If he [Carton] had given any utterance to his, and they were prophetic, they would have been these . . .'[28] The woman in question is Madame Roland, much praised by Carlyle and others for her demeanour in the face of death. She was not given pen and paper (if indeed she had been so quixotic as to request them); instead, moments before the blade fell, she had to make do with apostrophizing the great allegorical statue which had been installed in the square: 'O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!' This was the pithiest and most memorable statement of her life. For Madame Roland, a refusal and a moment of panic produced a high degree of articulateness. Placed in an equivalent position, Carton says both less and more than she did. Directed to the reader rather than to the crowd, his words combine the epigrammatic quality of her actual utterance with the expansiveness she apparently desired. By Dickens's lights, such a combination, however difficult it might seem in practice, is fully achievable; the Terror, he observes, allowed those caught within it to think that they could 'see a world, if it were there', and to see it in 'a moment' (III.2). This sort of enforced long-sight is the basis for Carton's hypothetical speech, the speech he *would* have delivered if he had said anything at all.

At the same time, the novelist provides cues which encourage a contrasting understanding of Carton's words. The penultimate short paragraph before Dickens presents his hero's farewell to the world reads as follows: 'They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peacefullest man's face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic' (III.15). Dickens means either that

Carton appeared to be 'sublime and prophetic' on his way to the guillotine or when his severed head – as was the custom – was held up for the crowd to view. In the ceremony of the execution, both moments were equally charged. Since the procession to the scaffold is so carefully described, our initial thought must be that we are supposed to envision Carton's lofty calmness in the tumbril, rolling towards the guillotine in the Place de la Révolution. On the other hand, since his speech – an extrapolation from his sublime and prophetic appearance – is given to us *after* the narration of the execution and thus appears to be posthumous, the second interpretation also has its attractions. We are left with a mixed impression: Carton seems to give a superb extemporized speech upon the scaffold, when there was just a moment allowed to him, and also to deliver a considered ghostly testament following his death, when there is (or was) all the time in the world. Two kinds of authority converge in his words as – sublimely, prophetically – he predicts the fates of friends and enemies alike, declares that France will survive the Terror and anticipates, finally, his own resurrection in the memories and the genealogical line of the Darnays, who will name their surviving son after him. His words represent the heroism of extemporization under extreme or impossible conditions (for though attached heads could and often did speak on the scaffold, severed ones almost never did, whatever their other legendary accomplishments[29]); it also expresses Dickens's yearning for a knowledge beyond the revenges of time, issuing from lips which have been stilled forever but from which, somehow or other, wisdom continues to roll.

In its emphasis on the urgency – and sufficiency – of reform, in its occasional struggles against xenophobic suspicions about France as a culture and in its fascination with Dr Manette's idyllic Soho refuge, finally so secure from continental depravity in all its forms, *A Tale* remains a distinctively Victorian fantasia on the theme of the French Revolution. We should hardly be surprised that the novel has these aesthetic and ideological limits. On the other hand, *A Tale* is also linked to a wider range of works, with a wide spectrum of political and historical sympathies. Dickens's tribute to Carton and Madame Roland, as well as his evocation of the prison of La Force,

where 'Charles Darnay seemed to stand in a company of the dead' (III.1), has a particularly striking parallel in Charles-Louis Muller's painting, *The Roll Call of the Last Victims of the Reign of Terror* (1850).[30] Muller shows a scene in what must be either the Maison Lazare, one of the Terror's many improvised prisons, or the Conciergerie, the Hall of Justice from which the condemned departed for the guillotine. At the centre of the scene is an official reading out the names of those called to their doom. Behind him is an arched door, through which, in a dramatic effect of saturated yellow light, a half-unconscious woman dressed in white is led to a waiting tumbril. Throughout the much darker hall in which the prisoners wait to hear their names (or perhaps to escape death once more), Muller displays a series of grouped tableaux: people of contrasting ranks and conditions wait with horror, panic and resignation, or while whispering last words of friendship and love. A woman on the far right, whose name has just been pronounced, rises in a twisting gesture from her chair, one hand on her breast as if to say, 'Is it me you want?' Just to the right of centre and in the foreground, sits the doomed poet André Chénier, searching for *le mot juste*. His left hand grips his broad forehead convulsively. His right hand, holding a pen, rests on a sheaf of papers, themselves lying on his knee. Since these people are the *last* victims, Chénier must be on the verge of hearing his own name: he was in the final batch of prisoners executed before Robespierre's fall. We can guess, therefore, that he will never finish his poem. In Chénier's own words ('Saint-Lazare'), the messenger of death 'On my lips will suddenly suspend the rhyme'. All the same, the act of composition, the power to judge France historically from the perspective of a man who is as good as dead, fills him with something perhaps even better than inspiration. Those whose lives are so brief must say what they have to say, once and for all, or (a slightly different matter) must speak as though in eternity already. Either way, to be cut short is a necessary condition for eloquence. Paradoxically, what appears to be a moment of writer's block becomes the sign of Chénier's historical authenticity. As in *A Tale*, the condensations of time and circumstance are played out in order to evoke last words – words which both were and were not articulated.

However, it is another, slightly later work – this time a novel – that offers the richest and fullest analogue to Dickens's: not just the last scenes, either, but the whole, rich design. Think of a man who is imprisoned unjustly for many years; who, on his emergence from prison, claims a daughter (in this case, an adopted daughter), to whom he must be both mother and father; who travels far away with her and lives in semi-anonymity, in the heart of a great city, a place where his past cannot catch up with him; who becomes excessively though understandably attached to this beautiful young woman, whose presence has saved his heart and spirit; who resents, though mostly unconsciously, her idealized, slightly implausible suitor, a man in rebellion against his own family's politics; who emerges, at a moment of insurrection, as a figure of incalculable strength and dignity, saving the pallid suitor (now rendered literally unconscious) by confronting a maelstrom of political and military violence from which he would have otherwise held aloof; who undergoes a symbolic death and then a symbolic rebirth, remaining invisible among events which he has at once escaped and miraculously transfigured. These charged materials – perhaps overwrought by the standards of later generations – suggest a book in which Dr Manette has somehow blended into Sydney Carton. The materials in question form, of course, the kernel of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), not a novel set in the eighteenth century, as is Dickens's, but one in which a highly marked triangle (father–daughter–suitor) is taken as the appropriate, perhaps the best possible, centre of a narrative about revolution, justice and self-sacrifice among historical pressures exerted by the demanding crowds of Paris. In this case, Hugo may have learned a little from Dickens, or at least been encouraged by his example (the debts more often run in the other direction).[31] It is not only, however, the possibility of direct influence which might interest readers at this chronological and cultural distance. Two further points deserve emphasis. First, there is the fact that Hugo too should have connected familial relations and national politics through the medium of a nearly solipsistic father–daughter connection: neither fathers nor daughters are supposed to live for the other alone, so, in both cases, the novelist is compelled to conceive of a larger milieu, a

world beyond the obsession he has evoked; history provides an escape from the way that families can spiral in upon themselves. Looking at *A Tale* and *Les Misérables* together, one might begin to think that this is a quintessential means for coming to terms with the expanding demands of democracy, and for thinking about the relations between an intimate structure of emotions and the movements of historical time on a mass scale. Second, there is the oddity that a book so small and a book so large should share as much as these. To recall a point made above about Carlyle, the imperatives of condensation – enacted formally, rhetorically and thematically – make *A Tale* comparable to a much longer work. With *The French Revolution* preceding it, and *Les Misérables* following it, this novel stands as Dickens's most memorable effort to see a world in a very small space indeed: a work short by its nature, proclaiming, indeed, the virtues of concision, yet curiously at its ease among giants.

NOTES

1. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1966), II, p. 281. Dickens had grappled with the problem of composing tiny yet coherent instalments at several previous stages of his career, most recently with *Hard Times* (1854). In the case of *A Tale*, however, his comments on smallness are both shrewder and more frequent than ever before.
2. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey, in progress (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), IX, pp. 35, 113, 145 (hereafter *Letters*).
3. This is Dickens's paraphrase of George Eliot's comment and apparent complaint about *A Tale*: see *Letters*, IX, p. 213.
4. See Jonathan Arac's comparison between *The French Revolution* and *Bleak House* in *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), ch. 6, pp. 114–38.
5. *Letters*, IX, p. 112. The word 'picturesque', which would not normally have this meaning, is used by Dickens both in this letter and in the Preface, as quoted above. On 'French drama' and ellipses, see *Charles Dickens' Book of Memoranda*, transcribed and annotated by Fred Kaplan (New York: New York Public Library, 1981), p. 5.

6. Albert Hutter, 'Nation and generation in *A Tale of Two Cities*', *PMLA* 93 (1978), 448–62.
7. On this point, see Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840–1880* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), p. 88.
8. Tidkins appears in Reynolds's lurid, lengthy, surpassingly popular and much-condemned serial, *The Mysteries of London*, 4 vols. (London: George Vickers, 1846). See especially *Mysteries*, I, ch. 27, where Tidkins is interestingly juxtaposed with a venerable Republican agitator, quite a different sort of man.
9. On the *citoyennes tricoteuses* of Paris, see Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
10. For London as the city of mystery, see I.3, 'The Night Shadows'. In the manuscript of *A Tale*, this is one of the most heavily worked-over paragraphs. In other crucial London passages, Lucie is a mystery even to her father, Dr Manette, and he, as it turns out, to her. Carton, of course, is a mystery to everyone, including himself, until his sacrifice at the end.
11. J. W. Croker, *Essays on the Early Period of the French Revolution* (London: John Murray, 1857), p. 519. 'The Guillotine' was first published in the *Quarterly Review* (1843).
12. Cf. Honoré de Balzac's *Les Chouans* (1829) and Anthony Trollope's *La Vendée* (1849). Even Victor Hugo's much less conservative *Quatrevingt-Treize* (1874) is largely devoted to La Vendée.
13. On 17 November 1793, Robespierre proposed: 'Between the people and its enemies, there has been a constant reaction in which a progressive violence has, in a few years, made up for the work of several centuries' ('Séance du 27 Brumaire An 11 (17 November 1793): Rapport sur la situation politique de la République', in *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1903–67), X, p. 168). On 3 March 1794, Saint-Just pleaded: 'Give the people revenge on twelve hundred years of transgressions against their ancestors [*forfaits contre ses pères*]' ('Rapport au nom du Comité de salut Public sur le mode d'exécution du décret contre les ennemis de la Révolution, présenté à la Convention Nationale dans la séance du 13 Ventôse An 11 (3 March 1794)', in Louis Saint-Just, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Michèle Duval (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1984), p. 715). In *A Tale*, it is the Defarges and others of their class who both articulate and act upon such arguments. For a commentary on the above quotations, see George Armstrong Kelly, *Mortal Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo Press, 1986), p. 311, whose translations I have used.

14. Arthur Young, *Travels in France & Italy During the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789* (1792; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1915), p. 335.
15. On John Russell's advocacy of reform and its pertinence to *A Tale*, see Alan Horsman, *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 143. Dickens's dedication (see Appendix II) of the novel to him is perhaps the best indication of how the author conceived its contemporary relevance. His decision to treat the French Revolution might also suggest several other contemporary references: e.g. there are loose parallels to the Indian Mutiny of 1857, to events in the France of Napoleon III or to the Italian revolution then in progress (and covered by *All the Year Round* at the same time that it was running *A Tale*).
16. On Carlyle and creative negation, see Myron Magnet, *Dickens and the Social Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 141–2.
17. See Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Rolf Reichardt, *The Bastille: A History of a Symbol of Despotism and Freedom*, trans. Norbert Schürer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), especially the chart of plot motifs on p. 8. This admirable but problematic study offers a rich trove of Bastille-lore; however, having discovered that certain motifs and images have a life of their own, the authors seem occasionally close to supposing that there was no Bastille, only a closed set of literary conventions and political polemics about it.
18. See Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), esp. p. 88.
19. Alain Boureau, *The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 75–91.
20. For a transcription of the MS tale of seduction, see Andrew Sanders, *The Companion to 'A Tale of Two Cities'* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 156–7. See also n. 5 to III.10.
21. Bulwer-Lytton's letter to Dickens does not survive. Dickens's response, a fascinating enumeration of sources as well as of narrative technique, is discussed in Appendix III.
22. Stephens's critique, which was first published by the *Saturday Review* (1859), is reprinted in *The Dickens Critics*, ed. George Ford and Lauriat Lane (New York: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 38–46. Stephens is interestingly confused by the temporal abridgements and cross references of Dickens's plot.
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