

Revenge History: *A Tale of Two Cities*

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By the time Charles Dickens came to write *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859 it had long been commonplace to say that “revenge” was a pre-modern phenomenon, belonging to “savage” social conditions in which individuals, families, clans, or tribes undertook the responsibility for meting out justice by inflicting injuries on those who had injured them. Victorians assumed that in primitive societies, without centralized states, peace and fairness could only be maintained through recognized systems of what we might now call mutual deterrence. As early as the seventeenth century in England, this do-it-yourself enforcement of social norms was acknowledged to be incompatible with nation states, where the sovereign governing power must hold a monopoly on justice and violence. As Francis Bacon explained in 1625, “Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man’s nature runs to the more ought law to weed it out.”¹ As Bacon indicated, vengeful feelings were not imagined to disappear just because the state discouraged people from acting on them; his point is that the law of a nation must be especially severe in restraining the impulse to private revenge because our nature “runs to” it. Moreover, the impulse to revenge a wrong, if properly managed and controlled by the state, was thought to form an important component of such civic virtues as adherence to the law and patriotic sentiment. Thus one late Victorian writer explained that the laws of criminal justice contain and channel the instinct to vengeance just as the marriage laws contain and channel the sexual drive, but neither justice nor marriage could exist without the energy of the raw emotions.

When Victorians considered the topic of revenge, therefore, they drew on a long tradition of portraying it as an ancient and perhaps inextricable human tendency, the restraint of which was an index of a civilization’s level of development. A number of Victorian thinkers considered the topic, some claiming that the very desire for revenge was weakening under modern conditions and others that the longing was as strong as ever; all, however, agreed that “the redress of private wrongs by private means” had been the

defining mode of justice in “primitive societies” and that it “must die out as civilized justice takes the place of the Barbarous *lex talionis*.”² It was, therefore, a long-established and incontestable truth that the practice of revenge by individuals and groups within a society ran counter to the natural direction of history.

With this consensus in mind, I wish to consider the anomalous case of the French Revolution in the nineteenth-century British imagination, and especially its representation in Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*. For British writers, the Revolution was unquestionably the inaugurating event of modern times, and yet they often depicted it as an inversion of the customary understanding of the relation between the modern state and revenge. Contemporary British analysts of the revolutionary period across the political spectrum inaugurated the practice: from the conservative Edmund Burke to the anarchist William Godwin and the youthful radical Samuel Taylor Coleridge, revolutionary-era Britons routinely identified vengeful wrath as the French Revolution’s dominant cause. Thomas Carlyle, Dickens’s most important source, not only continued that line of analysis in his enormously influential 1839 book, *The French Revolution: A History*, but also amplified the role of revenge and, to a certain extent, justified it. These authors and many more presented the Revolution as a process in which the progress of history, instead of opposing revenge, harnessed it; in which revenge, instead of resisting modernity, gave birth to it; and in which the modern state, instead of suppressing personal retribution, encouraged it.

This essay will analyze how *A Tale of Two Cities* partakes of the discourse linking revolution and revenge by comparing the novel with two earlier texts from the period of the revolution: one by Edmund Burke and the other by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The comparisons are designed to clarify not only the discourse Dickens inherited but also his methods of revising it. Moreover, they will help us to understand what it was about the French Revolution in particular that re-invigorated the idea of revenge and refitted it to describe some basic dynamics of *modern* society. In the course of these comparisons and in a separate concluding section on the novel’s narrative structure, I will be developing three primary arguments about *A Tale of Two Cities*. First, I will try to demonstrate that the revenge plots in *A Tale of Two Cities* are instances of what I’ll be calling “enlightened revenge.” I’m taking the concept of “enlightened revenge” (although not the term itself) from Edmund Burke’s description of how the spread of enlightenment political philosophy generated new experiences of social resentment, so it is to Burke’s 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that I will turn first. Second, I will further unfold the novel’s plot of enlightened revenge to show that it contains a shadow plot of progressive atonement, and I will use a 1795 essay of Samuel Taylor Coleridge to

demonstrate that the links between the two plots—revenge and atonement—are traceable to Revolutionary-era discourse. In the last part of my analysis, I'll explore how the novel's narrative analepses—its a-chronological ordering of events—stages and determines the outcome of the contest between the competing principles of enlightened revenge and atonement.

1. Burke, Dickens, and the Concept of Enlightened Revenge

When it appeared in 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections* shaped a signification section of British public opinion on the incipient revolution. Ostensibly written as a letter to a French friend, Burke's *Reflections* were intended to raise alarms among British readers over the events of the Revolution during its first year. Those events had included several spontaneous and violent acts on the part of furious crowds against civil and national authorities, (such as the storming of the Bastille, the lynching of a former Finance Minister, Foulon de Doué, and the seizure of the Royal family in the Palace at Versailles). That first year's events also included peaceful attempts to build new institutions (such as the creation of the National Constituent Assembly out of the old Estates-General). Previous to the publication of Burke's *Reflections*, most Britons had watched this drama with indifference or even a vague sense of approval. Many believed that the superior British Parliamentary tradition protected them from such upheavals, and they had little sympathy for French monarchical absolutism. Moreover, since the French monarchy had supported the American revolutionaries in the previous decade, many Britons thought the French king and his family were receiving their just deserts. Burke's *Reflections* turned a significant portion of British opinion against the revolutionary forces in that first year of their insurrection and was thus instrumental in preparing Britons for eventual war with Revolutionary France.

Burke plotted the Revolution as a revenge drama from the outset, but instead of assuming that it involved atavistic regression, he found the seeds of the current drama in the rise of several newly minted social groups. For example, he explained that the "monied interests" who had financed "the vast debt of France" but were still treated contemptuously by even the most impecunious aristocrats, went along with revolutionary measures "in order to be revenged."³ "The political men of letters" and other new professional groups—especially provincial lawyers—who hated the obscurity and "deepest subordination" in which they had hitherto been held, were also, he claimed, motivated by revenge. According to Burke, when these new social groups combined in

the National Constituent Assembly, they laid the ideological groundwork for dispossessing the Crown, Church, and aristocracy by spreading Enlightenment theories throughout the population.

Their introduction of the doctrine of equal rights—the abstract “Rights of Man”—to replace the *ancien régime*’s concept of differential rights and duties especially inspired a generalized modern revenge mentality, what I’m calling “Enlightened revenge.” I’ll illustrate Burke’s logic with a passage from the *Reflections* (which I find particularly resonant for *A Tale of Two Cities*) in which he describes the use the peasants made of the concept of the “rights of man” to claim Church lands newly confiscated by the National Constituent Assembly. Reading this passage, one should notice especially how thoroughly the idea of universal rights had revised the peasants’ understanding of their own past and wiped out the grounds for *ancien régime* land tenure. “In the citadel of the rights of men,” Burke complains,

. . . they find that men are equal; and the earth, the kind and equal mother of all, ought not to be monopolized to foster the pride and luxury of any men, who by nature are no better than themselves, and who, if they do not labor for their bread, are worse. They find that by the laws of nature the occupant and subduer of the soil is the true proprietor . . . ; and that the agreements (where any there are) which have been made with the landlords, during the time of slavery, are only the effect of duress and force; and that when the people reentered into the rights of men, those agreements were made as void as everything else which had been settled under the prevalence of the old feudal and aristocratic tyranny If you ground the title to rents on succession and prescription, they tell you from the speech of M. Camus, published by the National Assembly for their information, that things ill begun cannot avail themselves of prescription; that the title of these lords was vicious in its origin; and that force is at least as bad as fraud. As to the title by succession, they will tell you that the succession of those who have cultivated the soil is the true pedigree of property, and not rotten parchments and silly substitutions; that the lords have enjoyed their usurpation too long

Burke stresses here that the peasants, in learning to conceive of their abstract natural rights, have come to imagine history as a series of *wrongs*. They have learned to regard themselves as a class *injured* by the *ancien régime*, which through its unfair laws and traditions deprived them of what was naturally theirs. Instead of viewing themselves as a group naturally subordinated, they begin to see themselves as a class rivaling the aristocracy in their claim to the land. They are not only overworked, overtaxed, and

charged too much rent, but also *degraded* from their natural status. Hence the new-fangled concept of rights engendered a novel concept of the relation of the present to the past; peasants did not ask simply for progress beyond the present into a fairer system of land tenure, a kind of distributive justice, but rather for an end to the land's "usurpation" by the aristocracy and clergy, a kind of retributive justice.⁴ Instead of building on the past, Burke complained, they sought compensation for it. In the light of the rights of man, history became a record not just of sufferings that should be ameliorated but of culpable and preventable wrongs, which should arouse righteous resentment and demands for reparation. Thus, the logic of rights transformed the peasants into aggrieved victims focused as much on punishment as on progress.

Burke's specific judgments about the French Revolution were largely outmoded by the Victorian period, but his vignettes of class resentment only became all the more relevant as the century progressed. Plot situations of the sort Burke described multiplied in the literature of Restoration France⁵—one need only think, for example, of their predominance in Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*—and they found their way as well into British Romantic-era revenge novels like Godwin's *Caleb Williams*.⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century, it seemed almost self-evident that the spread of ideas about equality and individual liberty, combined with class competition for power and prestige as well as for economic advantage, would increase rather than decrease sensitivity about unequal social treatment and differential manifestations of respect, intensifying rather than restricting motives for revenge. Because the novel as a genre excelled at exploring the subtle weave of ideology, social identification, and personal sentiment in the construction of character, the various mentalities of modern resentment found along the social spectrum were its natural territory. I do not mean to imply that Burke was the sole inspiration for the social realism of the nineteenth-century novel, but he was one of the first to point out that the more the world progresses toward equal treatment based on individual rights the more it awakens personal feelings of resentment and vengeful ambitions. Enlightenment and revenge advance together.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens captured the intersection of vengeance and modernity through several techniques. Following the example of Thomas Carlyle, he stressed the sentiment of personal revenge in the motives of the Parisian crowd, consistently feminizing the crowd and focusing attention on its fury over injuries to the families of the poor. When the crowd lynches the Finance Minister Foulon, for example, its inspiration derives entirely from personal retaliation:

Foulon [the women cry] who told the starving people they might eat grass. Foulon

who told my old father that he might eat grass, when I had no bread to give him. Foulon who told my baby it might suck grass, when these breasts were dry with want Hear me, my dead baby and my withered father: I swear on my knees, on these stones, to avenge you on Foulon!⁷

The people have the sudden revelation that their former governors are personally responsible for their suffering, and thus vengeance becomes the main source of popular energy fueling history. Like Carlyle before him, Dickens downplayed the early, bourgeois phase of the revolution; indeed, he went even further and ignored the fact that it had any individual middle-class leaders whatsoever. One will search *A Tale of Two Cities* in vain for the names of revolutionary historical personae; neither the narrator nor the fictional characters ever make reference to such individuals as Robespierre, Saint-Just, Desmoulins, Danton, or Marat, nor do they ever mention the National Assembly or the Revolutionary Tribunals. In the vision of the novel, the Revolution is made by an anonymous crowd, acting spontaneously on motives of retaliation against the aristocracy.

And yet, even in its feminized and personalized instantiation, the Revolutionary crowd that kills Foulon is also recognized by the novel as partly enlightened, for Foulon, as Carlyle made clear in his own depiction of the lynching, was an appropriate symbol of the *ancien régime*'s indifference to the people's hunger. And even beyond its sense of the victim's culpability, the depiction of the crowd's rage in *A Tale of Two Cities* indicates not a regression to a primitive state but a progression toward a view of "the people" as *entitled* to anger. Historian Carla Hesse has pointed out that the angry violence of the mob and that of the Terror might be seen as ways of claiming popular sovereignty. In the *ancien régime*, the King's anger and ability to produce terror in the people were definitive traits. Derived directly from God's righteous anger, the monarch's rage and violence belonged to him not as accidental personal qualities but as the very essence of kingship, and they therefore belonged exclusively to him.⁸ For the people, in the form of a crowd, to make itself fierce and ferocious and even to claim the right of life and death over other human beings was to make a competing claim for sovereignty. Furthermore, the depictions by writers like Carlyle and Dickens of popular fury as a powerful force in making history were in themselves an acknowledgement of the transfer of sovereignty from the monarch to the people. As Carlyle argued, the distinctively modern phenomenon of the people's claim to righteous anger with political consequences was the transformative event that ushered in the age of modern democracy because it asserted the principle of popular sovereignty, and Dickens implicitly agrees with that judgment every time the narrator of *A Tale of Two Cities* puts the people on a par with the monarch by stressing that the Terror of

the Revolution was the response to, as well as the mirror image of, that of the state during *ancien régime*. As one historical critic puts it, “the enraged populace (one of the larger cats of history) had been let out of the bag, and had entered the ‘large Field of Power’ as a legitimate force for political change.”⁹

Dickens’s manner of focusing exclusively on the figure of the enraged crowd thus links modernity to revenge in the novel’s publicly enacted historical set pieces; but in the personal plot—the one that follows the individuals lots of the Darnays, Manettes, and Defarges—he makes the connection through a different figure. Readers of the novel will recall that the Parisian crowds tend to form around a few fictional and obviously allegorical personae, who represent a shadowy, underground leadership known as the *Jacquerie*, at the center of which sits Madame Defarge, her husband, and her drum-beating side-kick, called simply “The Vengeance”. These are the personnel of a private revenge plot, in which the protagonist Charles Evremonde/Darnay is pursued for the crimes of his aristocratic father against the family of Madame Defarge. Thus Dickens amplifies the motive of revenge by replicating it on parallel tracks: it is cried out in the streets, and it is plotted in hidden enclaves. By the time the full details of the private story are revealed in the last chapters, we are already used to the idea that revenge is the only motive for the revolution. Crowds and individuals may believe in Republican ideals and be eager to claim sovereignty, but the source of the passionate intensity that links individual action to abstract principles and drives the action is the desire to avenge long-standing wrongs.

Duplicating the revenge motive in the private plot, though, also allows Dickens to uncover its enlightened nature further, for in the narrative of Madame Defarge’s family the figure of the resentful, insubordinate, modern commoner appears as the kernel of the story. The salient fact of that narrative is the rape of Madame Defarge’s older sister and the killing of her male relatives by the Marquis St. Evremende, father of the protagonist. Because the salaciousness of the crime against the sister has tended to obscure the story of the victim’s younger brother, critics have had little to say about this character. Nevertheless, it is the brother, I believe, who is central to the plot’s design. In the first place, he tells Dr. Manette of the persecution that his family has suffered at the hands of their aristocratic landlords, and it is he, rather than his older sister, who incarnates Burkean modern resentment, for the enterprising peasant lad insisted on trying to avenge the wrong to his family in a way that asserted his *right* to do so. Instead of surreptitiously assassinating the rapist, he forces him to fight a duel. To be sure, the boy is killed, but he has nevertheless won an enormous symbolic battle by putting himself on an equal footing

with the aristocrat and insisting that his family, although peasants, possessed honor worth defending. As the peasant boy lies dying of a sharp wound to the heart, the twin brother of the aristocratic rapist (everything in this novel is doubled) contemptuously explains the scandalous meaning of the injury to Dr. Manette: “A crazed young common dog! A serf! Forced my brother to draw upon him, and has fallen by my brother’s sword—like a gentleman” (p. 353).

The peasant is as proud of the sword puncture as the aristocrat is appalled by it. Indeed, at first the youthful commoner resists Dr. Manette’s attempt to treat it, for it symbolizes his success in equating himself with the men who have injured his family, conveying his belief in his comparable humanity. “I tracked [the rapist] here,” explains the peasant youth to Dr. Manette, “and last night climbed in—a common dog, but sword in hand . . .” He has converted his oppressive feudal lord into a mere rival by forcing the nobleman to fight a duel and kill him “like a gentleman.” Just as the crowd strives for sovereignty with the monarch by its violent anger, the boy simply by forcing the aristocrat to recognize his anger by fighting with him gains a comparable dignity. Consequently he is partly revenged, and the novel emphasizes the radically leveling, egalitarian nature of his behavior: his opponent, he explains, “first . . . tossed me some pieces of money; then struck at me with a whip. But I, though a common dog, so struck at him as to make him draw” (pp. 355–6). Darnay’s father, the “younger” of the two Evremond twins had, indeed, been so shamed by crossing swords with a commoner that he broke his own weapon into pieces: “Let him break it into as many pieces as he will, the sword that he stained with my common blood; he drew to defend himself—thrust at me with all his skill for his life” (p. 356). The peasant has thus made himself an object not of contempt but of fear: “Proud as these nobles are, he is afraid to see me” (p. 356).

The vengeful dying peasant does not exactly speak the language of the Rights of Man, but his general discourse nonetheless echoes Burke’s description of the enlightened peasants’ worldview; they “abhor and reject all feudality as the barbarism of tyranny.” Thus “they know”, Burke satirically explains, “that almost the whole system of landed property in its origin is feudal; that it is the distribution of the possessions of the original proprietors, made by a barbarous conqueror to his barbarous instruments; and that the most grievous effects of the conquest are the land rents of every kind . . .” Dickens’s peasant takes up the same complaints: “We were so robbed by that man who stands there, as all we common dogs are by those superior Beings—taxed by him without mercy, obliged to work for him without pay, obliged to grind our corn at his mill . . .” (p. 354). The novelist’s sympathies are, of course, entirely with the peasant’s insubordination to

ancien-régime social relations, whereas Burke was chiding the National Assembly with the irony that it itself had taught the peasants to despise the system of land ownership and will thus not be able to force them to pay rents or taxes to new landlords. But both authors are recording the ideological moment when the old dispensation lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants, when they were no longer willing to accept their place in a natural hierarchy. Moreover, in one detail, their assessments of the ancient lineage of the peasantry, the opinions of Burke and Dickens even seem to coincide. “The peasants”, Burke remarks, “in all probability, are the descendants of . . . ancient proprietors, Romans or Gauls,” from whom the conquerors took the land. And Dickens provides what seems a symbol of the seniority of the peasants to the aristocrats:

“My glance had fallen, but a few moments before, on the fragments of a broken sword, lying among the hay. That weapon was a gentleman’s. In another place, lay an old sword that seemed to have been a soldier’s.” (p. 356)

The old sword wielded by the avenging peasant youth is thus a symbol of both the soon-to-be modern insurrection and the ancient wrong.

Manette, narrator of these events, indicates that this act of enlightened revenge, rather than the sexual violation, was the shameful secret that sent him to the Bastille and inaugurated the plot. “I always observed” Manette explains, “that their pride bitterly resented [an Evremonde’s] having crossed swords with a peasant The only consideration that appeared to affect the mind of either of them was the consideration that this was highly degrading to the family.” “They disliked me deeply,” he continues, “for knowing what I knew” regarding the boy (p. 358). The dueling peasant boy is thus the oldest figure of revenge in the book, and, as Manette explicitly emphasizes, he represents a new kind of French character: “I had never before seen the sense of being oppressed, bursting forth like a fire. I had supposed that it must be latent in the people somewhere; but, I had never seen it break out, until I saw it in the dying boy” (p. 354, emphasis added). The plot itself and all of its other avengers—Madame Defarge, the Parisian crowd, even Dr. Manette—derive from the peasant boy’s unprecedented “sense” of his oppression. This is a figure very different from the upstart avengers found in the early modern revenge tragedies, for Dickens assumes that his readers are in sympathy with both the purpose and the methods of the doomed boy. We should, therefore, recognize that *A Tale of Two Cities* is organized not on the plot pattern of instinctive savage justice but on the post-French Revolutionary model of enlightened revenge.

2. Dickens, Coleridge, and the Discourse of Enlightened Atonement

In this new type of plot as Dickens shapes it, the avenging youth is given a double, who is not an equally vengeful champion of the Evremondes, but instead a boy of that family who has been assigned the task of atonement. Like the peasant lad, this boy appears in Manette's narrative; they are separated by only a few paragraphs. And like the revenger, the second boy is accompanied by a woman, "young, engaging, and handsome, but not marked for long life" (p. 359). The woman, as you'll all recall, is the wife of the rapist and the mother of the protagonist, Charles Evremonde, afterwards called Darnay, and she had come to ask the doctor to help her locate the remaining child in the peasant family (who will grow up to be Madame Defarge) so that she might make amends for her husband's crimes. She introduces her little son to the doctor with this speech:

"For his sake I would do all I can to make what poor amends I can. He will never prosper in his inheritance otherwise. I have a presentiment that if no other innocent atonement is made for this [crime], it will one day be required of him. What I have left to call my own—it is little beyond the worth of a few jewels—I will make it the first charge of his life to bestow, with the compassion and lamenting of his dead mother, on this injured family, if the sister can be discovered." (p. 360)

First we see the young peasant in the role of the vengeful protagonist and then we see an even younger child, almost an infant, but already scripted into the alternative role of the expiating protagonist.

Let us consider the ways in which these paired roles mirror each other and why their paralleling is a peculiarly modern feature of the revenge plot. Revenge and expiation are born of similar sentiments, for the expiator no less than the avenger believes that the sins of the fathers will be visited on the children. Moreover, the atoner, like the revenger, apparently considers the generational responsibility to be just, for he is taught to dedicate himself to paying his father's debt even though he has no personal responsibility for it. Indeed, Madame Evremonde's formulation that "if no other innocent atonement is made for this, it will one day be required of him" seems to insist on the atoner's personal innocence. Moreover, it is only because he concurs with the revenger's condemnation of the parental crimes that he is conscious of his historical responsibility; the atoner must hold essentially the same enlightened view of history that the revenger holds. The very desire to forestall the vengeance before it overtakes him is another implicit admission of its justice and a sign of the sympathetic link between the atoner and the revenger. Each is caught in the toils of the past and neither is truly free to follow his own destiny.

Where did this concept of enlightened atonement as the obverse twin of enlightened revenge come from? From Burke we traced the idea that Enlightenment theories of equal rights increased the consciousness among common people of all the ways in which they had been wronged. When we look at reform movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we can see that similar ideas in Britain produced a mentality of expiation that was the other side of the coin of vengeance. In Britain, the change in moral tone that has sometimes been called the “humanitarian turn” encouraged popular participation in as well as debate about movements for social change as various as prison reform, poor relief, reform of the Royal Navy, church reform, and abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Far more than in France, Britain’s reform movements were led by Evangelical religious enthusiasts, who exhorted the government to alter its policies and practices lest God punish the entire nation.¹⁰ These movements recruited numerous middle-class people—men and women—who were not of the governing class but who nevertheless believed they would suffer for the nation’s actions. The great novelty of such unofficial social and political activities was that their participants protested not against wrongs suffered by themselves but against injuries done to powerless strangers. Fearing God’s righteous anger, they organized meetings, collected names on petitions, wrote pamphlets, and behaved as if they were responsible for the misdeeds of their country’s governors. Thus Boyd Hilton has called the period from 1785 to 1865 “The Age of Atonement” and has argued that the concept cut across political divisions, permeating British theological, economic, political, and social thought.¹¹

In the period of the French Revolution, especially when it was in the grip of the Terror, some Britons saw the violence as a retribution that might have been avoided if the French had atoned for the *ancien régime*’s abuses earlier. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, was still a young radical with republican sympathies when the French Revolution devolved into its terroristic phase, crushing the hopes of its friends in Britain. In a pamphlet he published at the height of the Terror in 1795, he depicted it as a setback for enlightened progress. It was modern only in the sense that it arose out of the People’s new consciousness of their oppression, but it was also suicidal: “Like Sampson” Coleridge laments, “the People were strong—like Sampson, the People were blind.”¹² The reference to the Biblical hero Sampson was timely, for “Samson” was the name given to the chief executioner who operated the guillotine, and many later writers were to comment on its aptness in terms very much like Coleridge’s. Witness Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*: “The name of the strong man of Old Scripture had descended to the chief functionary who worked [the guillotine]; but, so armed, he was stronger than his

namesake, and blinder, and tore away the gates of God's own Temple every day" (p. 303). Coleridge's use of the analogy, though, is less condemnatory and divulges the young radical's belief in the revolutionaries' tragic dilemma, even hinting that the Terror, like Samson of old, was a scourge in the hands of a vengeful God who was determined to punish the crimes of the guilty nation in the most dramatic manner possible.

Coleridge's pamphlet was an attempt to warn Britons away from a similar fate. They should not, he explained, fear revolution but the tyranny that had made it necessary: "French Freedom is the Beacon, that while it guides us to Equality should shew us the Dangers, that throng the road" (p. 6). He charged that in Britain *agents provocateurs* in the pay of reactionary forces were trying to dupe radical workers into violently retaliatory principles, ensnaring "a few into Treason, that [they] may alarm the whole into Slavery." Desires for revenge were, he warned, always easy to foment, for "they possess a kind of wild Justice well calculated to spread them among the grossly ignorant. To unenlightened minds, there are terrible charms in the idea of Retribution, however savagely it be inculcated" (p. 9).

Coleridge, though, could also foresee a less perilous progressive future, a road to enlightenment that would not involve such risks, the road of expiation. The vengeful poor, he explained, were at that time a small minority of the people in Britain but would soon increase in numbers "unless great and immediate efforts are used to lessen the intolerable grievances of our poorer brethren, and infuse into their sorely wounded hearts the healing qualities of knowledge" (p. 10). The language of this passage emphasizes not only the actions to be taken to avoid the people's vengeance but also the expiatory spirit in which they should be carried out. Coleridge is not merely recommending general education and reform; he is asking that the governors apply the remedies in atonement for their past transgressions and indifference. The people *do* have "intolerable grievances" and *are* the victims of wrongs; in Coleridge's metaphor, they have been wounded in their hearts and must be healed by penitent hands. This alternative view of the future as a project of making amends acknowledges that, for the masses of people, history has been a series of injuries. Coleridge thus shares the revengers' view of history rather than repudiating it, but he would exact a different sort of self-imposed and contrite recompense: the "great and immediate efforts" that would right the wrongs. Thus once one recognizes the guilt of the governors for inflicting wrongs on the poor, history has two possible futures: the revenger's and expiator's.

3. The Contest between Vengeance and Atonement in *A Tale of Two Cities*

Doctor Manette's narrative reveals that these two possible futures were present at the outset of the story. But by the time we encounter them, only one is viable, for the reading of the document that tells the earliest episodes of the story is the high-point of the revenge story. You will recall that Dr. Manette's narrative, supposed to have been written in 1767 during his incarceration in the Bastille, describes events that took place in 1757. The interpolated narrative thus relates the novel's *earliest* calendrical events, which set the entire chain of events in motion, but these are not revealed until the penultimate moment of the novel's plot, the second trial of Evremonde/ Darnay as an enemy of the Republic. In narratological terms, Manette's narrative is an extended analepsis (a backward movement of the novel's chronology), and it serves as both an origin for the story and a turning point for the plot. The Defarges produce the document in court, where its reading "called up all the most revengeful passions of the time, and there was not a head in the nation but must have dropped before it" (p. 361).

The irony, of course, is that the very document that introduces little Charles as the one charged with the responsibility to pay for his father's crimes is also the document that will condemn him to death for not having fulfilled that charge. Of course, the novel does not present the death sentence as just, but we should notice that by the time we hear Madame Evremonde instruct her son regarding his duty, we've already been made aware on more than one occasion of his failure. To be sure, we know that he did try to make amends to the injured peasant family, for tells his uncle in 1780 that he is abandoning his unsuccessful efforts "to obey the last look of my dear mother's eyes, which implored me to have mercy and to redress" (p. 154). *Why* he failed is left unexplained; he tersely remarks that he had "sought assistance and power in vain", indicating that his efforts were thwarted, presumably by his uncle. Thus the first phase of the contest between revenge and expiation was won by revenge, but the skeptical reader might wonder at the cavalier way in which Evremonde/ Darnay therefore washes his hands of all responsibility for his family's past, telling his uncle that he will abandon his title and estate to "live otherwise and elsewhere" (p. 155). He makes a little speech about his intention to "put [the estate] into some hands better qualified to free it slowly" (p. 155), but he never does anything of the kind. As the critic Lawrence Frank comments in response to this speech, "There are no hands better qualified than his own." Evremonde/ Darnay pays lip service to making amends, but his action (or lack of it) only shows his ambivalence toward the task. Lawrence Frank sums up the protagonist's paradoxical state of mind concisely: "He wants

to obliterate the past, to elude the responsibility he has acknowledged as his own.”¹³

Moreover, at a later stage in the plot, after having inherited the property and title, his failure at redress seems even more culpable. The narrator, indeed, takes Evremonde/Darnay to task for doing little to improve the lot of his own tenants after renouncing his title and moving to England. Indeed, the protagonist is made to accuse himself of dereliction, admitting that he felt more of a desire to escape his family’s past than to rectify it:

He knew very well, that in his horror of the deed which had culminated the bad deeds and bad reputation of the old family . . . , and in the aversion with which his conscience regarded the crumbling fabric that he was supposed to uphold, he had acted imperfectly. He knew very well, that in his love for Lucie, his renunciation of his social place . . . had been hurried and incomplete. He knew that he ought to have systematically worked it out and supervised it, and that he had meant to do it, and that it had never been done. (p. 271)

This is our first inkling that the protagonist had been conscious of *not* playing his appointed part; we are told toward the end of the second volume that he had all along been suffering from a “latent uneasiness” now “roused to vigorous life” by a letter from a former servant. The letter draws him back to France in the fatal year of 1792, after a twelve-year absence, and into the toils of Madame Defarge, who has inherited the mission of her avenging brother. Thus, victory in the contest between expiation and vengeance will go to the revenger, not just because the expiator had been thwarted at an earlier stage but also because he later forgot his role.

As Evremonde/Darnay’s self-reproaches indicate, the specific kind of forgetfulness that overcomes him is domestic happiness itself, represented by the peaceful idyll of his English home. And as the narrator expatiates on this theme in the following paragraph, we should note that he presents two possible plots covering the years 1780 to 1792; one is the marriage and happily-ever-after tale we have been reading and the other is the tale of an Evremonde/Darnay who adheres to the promise he made to his mother and assumes his historical responsibility.

The happiness of his own chosen English home, the necessity of being always actively employed, the swift changes and troubles of the time which had followed on one another so fast, that the events of this week annihilated the immature plans of last week, and the events of the week following made all new again; he knew very well, that to the force of these circumstances he had yielded: —not without disquiet, but still without continuous and accumulating resistance. That he had watched the times

for a time of action, and that they had shifted and struggled until the time had gone by, and the nobility were trooping from France by every highway and byway, and their property was in course of confiscation and destruction, and their very names were blotting out, was as well known to himself as it could be to any new authority in France that might impeach him for it. (p. 272)

The technique of doubling in this passage not only pairs the actual plot with a possible one but also stresses their generic opposition: in actuality, the hero has kept his plot on the road of a safe middle-class private life, but he might have situated it more centrally in “History” if he had not “yielded” to domestic circumstances. The counterfactual scenario thus reminds us of a founding tension in the historical novel form even while it chastises the protagonist for staying exclusively on one side of the generic binary. He has held his plot aloof from historical responsibility, exerting no “continuous and accumulating resistance” until “the time had gone by” for the possibility of benevolent intervention. Evremonde/Darnay never displayed the sense of urgency with which Coleridge prescribed “great and immediate efforts” to improve the people’s condition, and so it is not entirely surprising that he delayed doing his duty to the past, postponing the payment of his debt to the people on his estate and by extension to the French people as a whole.

The road to atonement in France, which he did not take, is now full of members of this own class fleeing in the other direction; he would have to swim strongly against history’s tide to reach his destination. In short, by the time Evremonde/Darnay focuses again on his historical mission of atonement, History itself has been taken captive by the spirit of revenge; it no longer offers the option of atonement. “A new authority in France” certainly does impeach him for having merely watched events unfold although he knew he owed his dependents “redress”. Indeed, the Revolutionary authority tries him twice: the first trial focuses on his inoffensive life in England and his relation to his father-in-law, Dr. Manette, and he is found innocent. But the second trial reveals the full extent of his father’s and uncle’s crimes, placing his peaceful English life in a different context. We might say that the first trial judges what the individual Charles Darnay actually did and finds it blameless, whereas the second trial judges what an Evremonde owes to the people and finds that the debt has not been paid by the person charged with its settlement.

The reader, as I remarked earlier, does not know that the protagonist has been considering an active alternative until “the time has gone by”; submerged in the idyll during most of the novel’s second volume, we are not made privy to the protagonist’s mental uneasiness regarding his shirked duty. What he should have been doing seems out of sight and out of mind until he has already embarked on his untimely, last-minute

attempt to help at least one of his former servants. Atonement is therefore consistently put out of the reader's imaginative reach as a live option by the way in which the plot reveals the chronological events of the story. We learn of it only as a regretted might-have-been alternative and not as a future possibility, not as a thing to hope for as we read. Retrospectively, we see forks in the road that we've always already gone past. We cannot, then, say that the plot is organized as an equal contest between revenge and atonement, since we only encounter the workings of the former. Why, we must wonder, does the novel introduce the possibility of expiation but develop it merely as a missed opportunity?

I will conclude this essay by attempting to answer this question in a way that I hope will shed light on the novel's ending. Thus far, I have been arguing that Dickens gave his protagonist the task of atonement in order to reinforce the work's moral consensus about the enormity of the *ancien régime's* wrongs and the need for retribution; the presence of an atoner thus underlines the fact that this is an *enlightened* revenge plot. And yet *A Tale of Two Cities* not only prevents the successful fulfillment of the task and exposes the protagonist to charges of dereliction but also relegates atonement to the status of a foreclosed possibility. Now I hope to explore why the novelist would have given the principle of revenge such a distinct temporal advantage over that of expiation. In the first place, the advantage emphasizes a characteristic of revenge that the novel repeatedly thematizes: its *insensitivity* to time. Perfectly figured in Mme. DeFarge's imperturbable patience, constant vigilance, and meticulous knitted record-keeping, vengeance bides its time. As the old adage has it, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."¹⁴ In explaining this norm to her husband, Mme. DeFarge also informs the reader about the rule the plot will follow: "Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule" (p. 207). In contrast, atonement is presented as pressingly time-sensitive. To stave off the people's vengeance, warns Coleridge, "great and *immediate*" efforts must be made, and inside the novel, Mme. Evremonde echoes that sense of urgency: "I have a presentiment that if no other innocent atonement is made . . . , it will one day be required of him" (p. 360). Revenge can and should take its time, striking most effectively when unexpected. Atonement, in contrast, has a deadline: it must intervene before revenge achieves an unstoppable momentum.

In the second place, the temporal advantage of revenge in this novel stems from the bifold nature of the genre: in this *historical* novel, the long-term perspective of revenge aligns with the grand narrative of the French Revolution, which we know from the history books will devolve into revenge-inspired slaughter. On the big stage of history, we know

revenge will win, and Dickens underscores that knowledge by purposely blurring the distinction between allegorical figure and novelistic character in his portrayal of Mme. DeFarge; we are never sure whether we are supposed to be hearing the oracle of History in her dialogue or the voice of a wronged individual. The personal plot must find its resolution inside the already-known outcome of the Revolution, and we might speculate that the mere presence of the expiation alternative, although under erasure, is a somewhat feeble attempt to mitigate the determinism of the narrative by reassuring us that something *might* have been done even though nothing *was* done. Although it was already too late for historical expiation by the 1770s, we are perhaps supposed to believe, the nation could have avoided catastrophe if it had acted earlier. As a private parallel to the history that did not unfold, Evremonde/Darnay might have made some local changes that would then have altered the outcome of his particular destiny. By raising that possibility, *A Tale of Two Cities* would conform to the historical novel's generic commitment to moral freedom even in the context of severe historical constraints.

If the atonement plot were a concession to the idea of moral freedom, though, it is still a remarkably inconsistent one, for when Charles receives his death sentence, he emphatically does *not* conclude that he should have redressed his family's crimes more expeditiously. Instead, he regrets that he was even minimally obedient to his mother's wishes: "It was the always-vain endeavour to discharge my poor mother's trust that first brought my fatal presence near you," he tells Dr. Manette. "Good could never come of such evil, a happier end was not in nature to so unhappy a beginning" (p. 364). This speech strongly suggests that the alternative of atonement was always just another branch of the road to violent retaliation against the hero. The two separate paths were always destined to resolve themselves into one. And this insight suggests a third reason for the foreclosed presence of the ambition to atone. Evremonde/Darnay's view is understandable, for as we've already seen, atonement seems to accept revenge's retaliatory logic, and the separation between them might therefore seem easy to breach. In the hindsight available after his trial, Charles quite reasonably comes to the conclusion that the effort of expiation was throughout subordinate to the revenge plot. Revenge seems the principle of commensurate punishment turned outward and expiation is the same principle turned inward; both apparently uphold the *lex talionis*. Atonement as redress might therefore be considered structurally foreclosed as a means of exculpation by its self-accusatory logic, which puts it in sympathy with revenge. To be sure, there is another concept of atonement, which will emerge at the end of the novel and seem to escape this logic, rising above the debt/ credit calculation that has laid a duty on the son of the Evremondes.¹⁵ But

if we accept the reciprocal injury commonality between revenge and redress, we can see that Evremonde/ Darnay's failure stems not only from his vacillation but also from the nature of his task; he is caught in the potentially tragic dilemma of being unable either to escape or to discharge his historical responsibility.

The failure of Evremonde/ Darnay's hesitant attempts at historical redress and the further labeling of them as "always vain" produce a historical impasse and seem to justify the novel's last-minute shift into a different kind of self-sacrificial action. Sydney Carton's famous substitution for the protagonist at the novel's conclusion reverberates with Christian implications, especially by suggesting the substitution of a principle of freely-given grace to replace the debt/ credit logic of the *lex talionis*. I will refer to this theological concept of Atonement by spelling it with a capital "A" to distinguish it from the more juridical and quotidian kind we've thus far been analyzing. Critics have rightly noted the features of Carton's execution that explicitly link it to Jesus Christ's redemptive sacrifice.¹⁶ In the religious-sacrificial context, rather than in everyday juridical practices, Atonement calls for a guiltless substitute who voluntarily dies to save others. Just as Christ could die to redeem the sins of all human kind because he was himself sinless, Carton (unlike Evremonde/ Darnay) can die to redeem the sins of both the *ancien régime* and the Revolution because he belonged to neither. Evremonde/ Darnay, in contrast, is disqualified from the role of Atoner in the end by his "original sin" of having been born an Evremonde; executing him would simply be another turn in the cycle of vengeance rather than an escape from it. He is further disqualified because, as I've been arguing, he had his chance to expiate the inherited guilt and he neglected it. He is, therefore, *too guilty* to be executed for his forebears' crimes, whereas Carton is a stranger to French history, a proxy both individually and genealogically outside of the retaliatory dynamic. As critics have noted, the religious idea that a sacrificial redeemer must be an innocent proxy has been widespread in many cultures, even though it is most commonly associated with Christianity.¹⁷ In addition to having no inherited side in the conflict, Sydney Carton has a strong motivation—his love for Lucie Darnay—to give up his life voluntarily, which is another requirement of redemptive sacrifice. Because Carton belongs to neither side of the conflict and is solely responsible for his own death, he can shift the mode of the novel's ending from terror to transcendence by symbolically breaking the novel's cycle of vengeance.

Thus the Atonement ending has generally been seen as a reenactment of the transition from the Old Testament order of stern punishment to the New Testament order based on forgiveness. However, since we have been tracking the unequal contest between revenge

and redress through the novel, we are in a position to see that the introduction of Atonement gives the final victory in that competition to revenge. The defeat of quotidian atonement is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the disproportion between the figures of the twinned protagonists in the last two chapters. The last chapter points us to the symbolic domain of sacrificial redemption, which does not pretend to any historical efficacy, holds itself above the present historical moment of crisis, and climaxes with Carton's prophetic self-exultation. Each of these details contrasts sharply with our last view of Evremonde/Darnay, who dwindles from an active agent to a passive body.¹⁸ He seems returned to his earliest state in the narrative chronology, lying semi-conscious in a carriage as he is meekly conveyed out of the country by his wife and Mr. Lorry. Even when distracting us from Evremonde/Darnay's failure by concentrating instead on his mere survival through Carton's sacrifice, the novel further diminishes his stature. He is more helpless at the end than the child Dr. Manette first saw sitting in Madame Evremonde's carriage thirty-five years earlier, and he is no nearer completing the task of historical redress.

The conclusion's sublimation of the historical dilemma in an ecstasy of prophetic vision has often been faulted by critics as fatuous, a distracting combination of adventure-tale heroics and sentimentalism, but the ending at least candidly acknowledges that Carton's sacrifice led to no era of forgiveness and reconciliation in France.¹⁹ Indeed, Carton's prophetic visions remind the reader that the Revolution had entered what Coleridge and other sympathetic British observers saw as its suicidal stage, the phase in which even the original revolutionaries were denounced and executed as enemies of the people:

“I see Basard, and Cly, Defarge, The Vengeance, the Juryman, the Judge, long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument, before it shall cease out of its present use.” (p. 404)

We cannot deny that the narrator here indulges in a moment of “retributive” satisfaction while contemplating the fate of the protagonists' enemies. More importantly, though, Carton also credits the spirit of revenge with enacting the work of reparation, for he goes on to see, “the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out” (p. 404). In this surprising sentence, it is the “evil” that makes “expiation for itself” and in doing so eventually exhausts itself. The idea of atonement as first introduced by Mme. Evremonde might be said to have combined the two ideas of, first, fulfilling the function of revenge by paying the debt of an aristocratic family to the people, and second, overcoming revenge through

gracious contrition. Thus the dying mother had required “redress” and “mercy” from her son. In the end, the concept clearly breaks into its constituent parts: an enlightened but worn-out regret that amends were never made is figured by Evremonde/ Darnay, while its sublimated principle of hope, liberated from time, is figured by Carton. Carton symbolically overcomes revenge by freely giving his life in a Christlike self-sacrifice, but his Atonement side-steps the retributive function. Thus, between them, the twinned heroes leave the job of redress to be accomplished by history’s revengers.

Notes

- 1 Sir Francis Bacon, “Of Revenge” (originally published in 1625), in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 347.
- 2 Daniel Hack, “Revenge Stories of Modern Life,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol 48, No. 2. Hack is here quoting the author of “Notes” in *The Nation* 24 June 1880: 475. Hack’s larger argument is that one often finds revenge plots in novels about the strains of modernity precisely because such plots seem obsolete: “revenge returns so that modernity can be left behind” (p. 284).
- 3 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. and intro. Thomas H. D. Mahoney (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), p. 124. All quotations are from this edition, and subsequent page numbers are given in the body of the essay.
- 4 Similar charges of usurpation were made against the British Crown by American revolutionaries and by Parliamentarians in the English Civil War era. For a discussion of the roles of resentment and revenge in modern revolutions generally see Marc Ferro, *Resentment in History*, trans Steven Rendall (Cambridge, Ma.: Polity, 2007), pp. 21–72.
- 5 For an analysis of revenge in Balzac’s novels, see Katherine Maynard, Jarod Kearny and James Guimond, *Revenge versus Legality: Wild Justice from Balzac to Clint Eastwood and Abu Ghrab* (New York: Birkbeck Law Press, 2010), Kindle Edition, Chapter 1. See also Kris Vassilev, *Le Recit de Vengeance au XIXe Siecle* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2008), *passim*. For a discussion of the importance of resentment and revenge in the nineteenth-century novel generally and also specifically in Dickens’s novels, see Joseph Litvak, “Unctuous: Resentment in *David Copperfield*,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 20: 2 (2012): 127–150.
- 6 For a brief overview of the effects of revolutionary violence on the development of Romanticism, see Robert Maniquis, “Holy Savagery and Wild Justice: English Romanticism and the Terror,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 28 (1998): 365–95. As Maniquis puts it, “nineteenth-century writers never forgot the French Revolution—both its hope and the challenge its violence posed to the imagination” (p. 394). Also important on this theme is John Kerrigan’s “Revolution, Revenge, and Romantic Tragedy,” *Romanticism* 1 (1995): pp. 121–140. For a compelling general account of the figure of the “Romantic avenger hero”, see W. H. Auden’s *The Enchaféd Flood; or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951).
- 7 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Penguin, 1981; first published, 1859), p. 252. All other quotations are from this edition, and page numbers are given in the body of the text.
- 8 For Hesse’s discussion of the sovereign’s use of salutary terror in the *ancien régime* and the Revolutionary appropriation of that power, see “The First Total Terror” (Unpublished Working Paper for the Stanford Conference on Terror and the Making of Modern Europe (April 2008),

cited with (I hope) the permission of the author.

- 9 Andrew M. Stauffer, "Romantic Anger and Byron's Curse" *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, n. d.), p. 4. Stauffer discusses the changes in the literary representation of anger after the Revolution, and the phrases he quotes are from Andrew Young's pre-Revolutionary 1728 *Vindication of Providence*, which held that *only* the King's anger could be politically significant.
- 10 For example, the rhetoric of the campaign for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade frequently warned that God would punish Britain for its role in the transportation of bartered Africans to the Americas. Works expressing the need for national atonement include pamphlets like James Stephens, *Europe Chastised and Africa Avenged* (1818), Histories like Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (1808), as well as numerous anti-slave-trade poems of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, William Blake, Hannah More, and William Cowper.
- 11 Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (New York: OUP, 1996).
- 12 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Moral and Political Lecture Delivered at Bristol" in *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, Vol 1 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 6. All subsequent quotations of this work are also from this edition, and page numbers are given in the text.
- 13 Lawrence Frank, "A Tale of Two Cities: The Poetics of Impasse," *American Imago*, 36: 3 (1979): 222. Frank seems to be the only previous critic of the novel who has noticed Darnay's dereliction of duty.
- 14 Apparently a French proverbial saying, Eugene Sue's quotation of it in his 1841 novel, *Mathilde*, is its first known written instance.
- 15 In *Atonement and Self-sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), Jan-Melissa Schramm notes that "The extraordinary coincidence of national soul-searching, expressed in both political and theological forums, and Dickens's own concerns in [the 1850s] produced a corpus of writing preoccupied with the notion of expiation and the role of the suffering substitute, by which, in Judaeo-Christian economies, such debts were habitually paid" (p. 140). The question of whether or not the whole notion of paying a debt, instead of receiving the free gift of grace, was compatible with the New Testament was one of the issue at stake in a lively 1850s debate over Christ's Atonement.
- 16 See, for example, Kenneth M. Sroka, "A Tale of Two Gospels: Dickens and John," *Dickens Studies Annual* 27 (1998): 145–69; David Rosen, "A Tale of Two Cities: Theology of Revolution," *Dickens Studies Annual* (27 (1998): 171–85. For a more secular reading of Carton's sacrifice, see John Kucich, "The Purity of Violence: *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 8 (1980): 119–37.
- 17 Apropos this issue, see especially Mark M. Hennelly, "Figuring the Scapegoat in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 30 (2001): 217–242. See also Jan-Melissa Schramm's account of British theologians' cognizance of the anthropological evidence linking Christian doctrine to primitive sacrifice. She also gives a fascinating outline of qualities considered necessary in the proxy in order for Atonement to be effective. See Schramm, pp. 56–7.
- 18 Kucich also sees the substitution as a successful act of rivalry on Carton's part.
- 19 For critiques of Carton's death see James Fitzjames Stephen's contemporary review and such twentieth-century critiques as Albert D. Hutter, "Nation and Generation in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *PMLA* 93 (1976): 448–462; and David D. Marcus, "The Carlylean Vision of *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Studies in the Novel* 8 (1976): 56–68.