

A Study of Aggression: *A Tale of Two Cities*

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Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is a novel interesting for its curious blend of a family story and a troubling historical vision inspired by the Reign of Terror in the French Revolutionary period. This analysis has two main objectives. First, to investigate the manner in which the melodramatic family phantasy as a narrative ideogeme is dealt with in this novel. Secondly, to map the main arguments implied by the novel's study of the Terror. The emphasis is on the way in which *A Tale*, prefiguring psychoanalysis, identifies and locates a sociolibidinal dynamic of destructive drives that mark both the melodramatic ideogeme and the politics of Terror.

Towards the end of *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud writes: "The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction".¹ It seems that *A Tale of Two Cities* deals precisely with a failure to master such an instinct. The closing pages of the novel centre on the execution of Sydney Carton by La Guillotine, the instrument of death that sums up the aggressive project of the Terror. At the same time this particular execution is also an instance of self-destruction through Carton's virtual suicide. Like Freud, Dickens poses the problem of Communal life in terms of a libidinal economy. In order to grasp the symbolic field within which *A Tale* articulates this problem, it is necessary to go through two of its texts that decisively determine its discursive horizon. The first text is that of melodrama: already a superficial glance at the novel reveals a vast variety of melodramatic formulas and ideologemes, from mistaken identities, secret relationships and disguised truths to the emergence of triumphant virtue after a long series of perilous trials. The central melodramatic process is the disentanglement of a moral universe from a web of uncertainty and insecurity. *A Tale* seems to mime this movement, but it also locates a traumatic antagonism at the core of the revealed

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, W. W. Norton and Co., New York, 1961, p. 92.

morality. The second text is one that knows no synchronous paradigm, but is rather a precursor in a kind of writing that is sometimes termed dystopian. I hasten to add that, strictly speaking, *A Tale* is not a dystopia proper, in the sense of a historical literary genre. It is a study of a (historical) totalitarianism, and to that extent a forerunner of modern dystopias. Yet it is also dystopian in a deeper sense in that it views totalitarianism as tendentially recurrent, or rather, as tendentially everpresent in society. In my view, this dual line of analysis might help towards a new understanding of *A Tale*, a story that Dickens – rather enigmatically – described as his best.²

As a point of departure for this analysis of *A Tale of Two Cities*, I will take Peter Brooks's book *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks wants to deal with the melodramatic mode, and his approach finds a certain inspiration in Northrop Frye's narrative analysis. Frye defined melodrama as a form of comedy, a serious comedy or comedy without humour, with two important themes: "the triumph of moral virtue over villainy, and the consequent idealizing of the moral views assumed to be held by the audience".³ But for Brooks, who does not have a quarrel with the thematic part of the definition, melodrama should be viewed as an independent mode, which in fact constitutes a fact of the modern imagination. He defines melodrama in opposition to the modern melodramatic mode, which is radically deconstructive and suspicious. The definition of the melodramatic mode is therefore fairly broad, for it covers a substantial area of modern writing, and for Brooks most of Victorian novel-writing would have to be accommodated within his view of melodrama. The birth of the mode he locates at "the epistemological moment of the final liquidation of the traditional sacred".⁴ Melodrama is a response to the dissolution of the traditional epistemological edifice that was based on a notion of transcendent authority. The gradual dilapidation of that edifice, started in the Renaissance, reaches its symbolic climax with the advent of the French Revolution, so that it is more than a coincidence that the origin of the theatrical genre of melodrama is to be found within the context of postrevolutionary theatre. The French Revolution not only staged the collapse of the old order – it also manifested, in its oratorical production, a concern for "the location, expression and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths".⁵ This drive, born in the face of the vacuum created by the demise of traditional authority, also characterises the melodramatic mode, which "represents both an urge towards resacralisation and an impossibility of conceiving sacralisation other than in personal terms".⁶ The melodramatic mode seeks to make visible a moral universe, but it can do so only through the articulation of a Manichean struggle of good against evil, a struggle that is highly personalised. Thus a melodramatic plot typically develops the motif of virtue persecuted yet ultimately triumphant. But it is essential not only that virtue should escape persecution, it also has to be *recognised* as virtue. This

2. In a letter to F. J. Régnier dated October 15th, 1859, Dickens wrote: "I hope it is the best story I have written". Quoted in *The Nonesuch Dickens. The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. iii, The Nonesuch Press, Bloomsbury, 1938, p. 126.

3. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p. 47.

4. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

melodramatic moment of anagnorisis demands that the homage to virtue should be conspicuous, public, spectacular.

The process of melodrama – the demonstration of a moral law – requires a passage from what Brooks calls the moral occult to the publicisation of the moral law. This is why it uses formulas of disguised identities, mysterious parentage, deceptive relationships and other devices for suggesting confusion. In order to become evident, the moral universe must first be uncertain and concealed. The moral quest and the emergence of a moral universe out of confusing reality seems to entail a characterisation of melodrama as a mode of excess. The hyperbolism and sensationalism of melodrama can be traced back to the need to announce confusion and underscore the difficulty and the straining with which the moral universe is established. The excess is therefore defined as the hyperbolism of the “vehicles of representation” in what appears to be a strenuous attempt to make reality meaningful, to make it deliver a moral code. This excess is obviously parallel to the sense of uncertainty that is the starting point of the melodramatic drive – the uncertainty which is due to the liquidation of transcendence. In a way, it may be said that this structural relationship of instability constitutes the traumatic core of melodrama, the point of its breakdown that can merely be symbolised in different ways, but never removed. Brooks however rather tends to look at the mobilising and reassuring function of the melodramatic process: “It works to steel man to resistance, it keeps him going in the face of threat... there is virtue in clarity of recognition of what is being fought for and against”.⁷ To the extent, then, that Brooks tends to iron out this fissure that decisively structures the mode, an addition should be made to his analysis in order to stress the problematic character of the melodramatic drive. In his few brief remarks on melodrama, Frye accuses it of a self-righteousness that results directly from the melodramatic idealisation of the presumed morality of the audience. The Manichean polarisations into moral absolutes – a representative melodramatic tendency – thus may take the form of moral absolutism that daemonises and proscribes the antagonist – which is whatever the interpellated audience excludes from its self-definition. The fissure at the heart of melodrama is precisely this self-righteousness, the moment when the absolutist Manichean drive displaces the melodramatic instability onto the antagonist. As a phantasy of moral certainty, melodrama is always caught within this tension, and its phantasing of a moral universe has to be always related back to this structural limitation.

In what sense does *A Tale* dialogue with the melodramatic paradigm? The formulaic drive of melodrama is readily recognisable at the plot level: the story presents itself in terms of a personalised battle between the Manichean polarisations of good and evil, ending in the triumph of the virtuous one. The good ones are Manette, Lucie and Darney, the villains and the persecutors the Evremondes and the Defarges. The sensationalist stuff is also there: prisons, escapes, resurrectionism, revolution, public executions. The apparent confusion of identities, mistaken relationships, clandestine societies, espionage, unrecognised and unrequited love, all work to inscribe this sensationally eventful universe with some sense of a deeper design. Not to mention the repeated images of virtue spectacularly released from danger – Darney’s acquittals in

7. Ibid., p. 206.

court, for instance. But moving from the melodramatic syntax to phantasy figuration, we perceive that the melodramatic phantasy frame is used to articulate a specific mid-Victorian ideologeme. Quite literally, this ideologeme should be read as a family romance – not in Freud's special sense of *Familienroman* but as a romance in which the *family* is a hero. The obsession with this type of narrative may be traced throughout the Victorian middle-class novel, taking the form of a simple phantasy of the disruption and reestablishment of a family structure, one that reflects the specific sexual and social politics characteristic of the symbolic practices of the Victorian middle-class. In terms of content, this ideologeme advocates a version of domestic morality couched in the cultural system of Victorian patriarchy. In terms of function, it tries to resolve symbolically the social and sexual antagonisms which constitute the conditions of its formation. The family is the hero of this ideologeme which we designated as family romance precisely because what is at stake is its own structure – the internal relationship of its members and a certain independence from other contexts as something that has to be established or preserved. If it often appears that the family becomes a figure standing for the entire community in such narratives, it is also because the family effectively devours, or represses, the social reality external to it.⁸ At a very general level, *A Tale of Two Cities* complies with this narrative paradigm, in that the system formed by its characters appears to be virtually contained within a family. The story revolves around the Lucie-centred group of characters – Manette and Lorry as father figures, Darnay and Carton as rivals for Lucie's affection. Even Barsad the spy turns out to be Miss Pross's long-lost brother, and due to her position as servant Miss Pross belongs to the extended family of the bourgeois household. As for the Defarges, they are related to the Evremondes in terms of the older, aristocratic notion of family, according to which the feudal master is "father" to his serfs. The family romance dramatises a transformation from the aristocratic family structure of the Evremondes to the new bourgeois family of the Darnays: it is as if all the main roads and byways of the story – including the revolutionary turmoil – are put together with the sole purpose of effectuating this transformation. The new structure is the "hero" that gradually grows strong and ultimately defeats its adversaries, the Evremondes and the Defarges or the social orders they stand for. Finally, we should note that what triggers off this particular series of events is in itself a family affair, or, rather a crisis within the old family structure. It is the act of rape of Madame Defarge's sister by an Evremonde, who thus exercised the feudal privilege of being husband to all his women serfs. It is this moment of crisis, when an aristocratic right is no longer seen as a right but as breach of a right, that starts the fateful nemesis in the shape of Madame Defarge and eventually leads to the emergence of the Darnays.

A peculiar feature of this progress towards the melodramatic happy-ending is that there are at least two melodramatic subplots intertwined. This results from the structure of the Lucie-centred family at the beginning of the novel – for at that moment we find

8. There exist critical readings of *A Tale* that insist on an analogy between society and family in that novel, i.e. that family is used as a figure for social processes. A. D. Hutter, for instance, tends to look at the novel as a dramatisation of the father-son conflict, both in generational and political terms ("Nation and Generation in *A Tale of Two Cities*", *PMLA*. vol. 93, no. 3, 1978). I shall insist more on the manner in which the novel treats the Victorian family structure as an object of a particular ideological phantasy.

that there are two things lacking in Lucie's life: a father and a husband. The completion of her family thus initiates two lines of action: one a search for her father, the other a search for a husband. The story of Manette – the search for the father – is to a large extent presented retrospectively, while the story of Darnay – the husband search – is laid out progressively. This very fact strikes us as important, as we learn that their trajectories will indeed clash. One is indeed tempted to read their confrontation in the interpretative key – Freudian or otherwise – of generational rivalry, a struggle between the young and the old in which the young ultimately prevail, though at some cost. The very fact that Manette – or what he once wrote himself to be in his long-lost biographical letter – denounced Darnay to the Revolutionary Tribunal points to some antagonism between the two, or at least to some “incompetence” on the part of Manette that prefigures a similar inability of Darnay to extricate himself from the adverse pressures of the outside world – without the agency of an other.

At any rate, Lucie's twofold lack makes her the object of desire for most of the male characters in the story, and a kind of stronghold emanating an air of security. At the beginning of the text she is introduced as the paradigmatic Victorian angel of the hearth – the only problem being that she has no hearth to guard. Her condition of incompleteness is obviously in need of some *damning*. This need becomes even more traumatic as she is reunited with her father, who turns out to be more of a child – one in the long line of Dickensian infantile fathers. That something is not quite right with his paternal authority is already inscribed in his name: Manette is a *man* with a feminine ending (-ette). This cross-linguistic and cross-sexual reference betrays a structural instability in his identity: he keeps jumping in and out of his different selves, unable to reconcile them effectively. In addition to his oscillations from amnesia and back, all his attempts to resume the role of authority are presented as pathetic failures. As an amnesiac in prison, Manette is reduced to making ladies shoes in what appears to be a gesture revealing an unconscious wish to look after his daughter. As the Citizen Doctor among the Jacobins he has no success in damming the onrush of what was once his own vengeful desire, and is now the propelling force of Madame Defarge – to “exterminate” all the Evremondes. The infantile Manette embodies a certain failure deriving from his political existence: his private or familial role is deeply affected by his inclusion in the political turmoil of the time. In this respect, Darnay is Manette's double: he too is a bourgeois snatched by the call of his conscience from the security of his hearth to rectify injustice only to be landed in prison. In order to fulfil the melodramatic promise of virtue triumphant, both will need extensive and sensational assistance. Manette is aided by Lorry, who lends him the protection of business as usual even amid the revolutionary commotion; Darnay is aided by Carton, who pays a much higher price to free his rival, double, and imaginary model adopted towards the end of his life.

Let us take another look at the family romance. The story economy seems to be shaped by a concern to pursue the completion of a certain familial project. The obstacles on this course are external to the desired family structure and spring from interferences by different social orders, first the ancien regime and then the Terror. We should remember that the family romance ideologeme is offered by the text as a source of imaginary identification for the mid-Victorian middle-class audience, reproducing a phantasy about the existence of a moral universe that would put the historical experience of that class – an experience that is traumatic and antagonistic in many ways – into a

reassuring perspective. This reassurance takes the peculiar shape of an escape from social reality. This explains the variety of escape situations in the novel – Darnay's several escapes just in the nick of time are finally given the climactic conclusion of his escape from prison, Paris and France, facilitated by Carton's sacrifice. The Darnay family triumphantly escapes from the pressures of history, but it can only do so at a price demanded from others. It is not accidental that all of Darnay's helpers – Lorry, Miss Pross, and finally Carton – are in some way marked by a hyperbolic exercise of libidinal repression. The helpers are all childless, having no other care in the world but to look after the Darnays. The reproduction of the Darnays requires the barrenness of their helpers. But inside the Darnay family there are also traces of antagonisms with centrifugal effects, snagging the escapist thrust of the family romance. Lucie is unequivocally represented as the Victorian domestic angel, the commonest Victorian phantasy involving the feminine positive role model. She is desired by a whole train of suitors – Stryver, Darnay, Carton, and she is credited with a list of functions that typecast her firmly as the domestic angel – familial devotion and self-denial, an object of desire not expected to desire, at least not too much. It is, of course, Carton who describes her as a "golden-haired doll";⁹ and when he does that he is not only trying to fend off what he believes to be his impossible desire, he is also recognising a truth: it is because she is a golden-haired doll that his desire is impossible to realize. Lucie being a sociosexual stereotype, her aprioristic rejection of Carton is easily read as expulsion in both sex and class terms. Significantly enough, whenever she swoons in the face of disaster – which she does quite often, seeking escape from the pressures of reality – there is always Carton around to help her; the fact inversely revealing that her repression of Carton keeps affecting her all the same. For all this, Lucie is best understood as a representation of a Victorian patriarchal phantasy, but not one that can be identified with the sexual politics of the text, (or ascribed to – some presumed authorial phallocentrism: Dick/ens). Especially as Lucie is paired off with Madame Defarge, who is something like her problematic opposite: a representation of the common Victorian phantasy of feminine evil. Not only is Madame Defarge depicted with a mixture of awe and sympathy, as "a strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty which not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike into others an instinctive recognition of these qualities" (445). This "tigress" is also seen not as representation of some pure, transcendental evil, but a kind of reaction: she represents the nemesis of repression, a violent response to violent repression.¹⁰ The instance of repression that forms her is both social and sexual in character: it was the rape of her sister by a Marquis Evremonde. Not that she appears any more likeable for this aetiology, but the text does shift her unlikability from a sexist phantasy to the social context – it blames "the time that laid a dreadfully disfiguring hand" on her, insisting that it was "opportunity /that/ had

9. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 106. All subsequent quotations from *A Tale* are from this edition. The page number will be bracketed.

10. A. D. Hutter points out how later interpretations of Madame Defarge tended to daemonise her. Cover illustrations of some later editions of the novel often depicted her as an old hag, whereas the original Phiz illustrations made her look like a dark-haired version of Lucie, who is her coeval. It goes to show how easy it is to domesticate a misinterpretation.

developed her into a tigress” (445). As for the contrast with Lucie, Madame Defarge highlights that fundamental sexism underlying both these Victorian phantasies on feminine roles, according to which self-determination and initiative in woman are interpreted as certain signs of villainy.

However, it is with the figure of Carton that *A Tale* reaches the point of its most complex dialogue with the family melodrama. Without Carton's sacrifice there would be no happy-ending for the Darnays. This business of his sacrifice, however, seems to revolve around a discussion of his guilt and his redemption. His guilt is actually his difference from Darnay: his lack of respectability, his presumed libertinism, his being given to an unrestrained pursuit of his pleasures – his “dissolution”.¹¹ His sacrifice is a “far, far better thing – than /he/ has ever done” (466) – his sacrifice to Darnay, by which in his reverie that concludes the novel he can phantasise about being admitted into the Darnay family – “I see Her with a child upon her bosom, who bears my name” (465). Yet, it is impossible to avoid the question of why there must be such a radical solution to Carton's dissolution. In the libidinal economy of the story his sacrifice has a curious place: it is not only a trick to effectuate the triumph of the phantasy that wants to see Darnay get out of prison, it is also a way of ridding Darnay's family of Carton. Or of what he stands for – the subject presumed to enjoy,¹² placed on the other side of social and sexual respectability. Carton becomes for others – and finally for himself – a phantasy figure that summons the cultural and social regions of some intolerable threatening *jouissance*. We witness almost none of his dissolution, but are continually led to postulate it: slyly enough, Dickens keeps presenting Carton as without substance, as a phantasy figure *presumed* to enjoy, as an other constructed by a particular ideological phantasy, acquiring meaning only through his use by that phantasy. Besides, if Carton is to be redeemed, he must finally subscribe to the same phantasy that presumed the *jouissance* in him, and renounce that *jouissance* in the name of a “far, far better thing” – in the name of the destruction of that *jouissance*. Carton does precisely that by finding his imaginary model in Darnay, and by phantasising that he can – through his sacrifice – become like Darnay. Symbolically, his entrance into the Darnay order is staged as castration: La Guillotine signifies the cessation of his illegitimate desire – including his desire for Lucie, the downfall of his *jouissance*, and, in an ironic twist, it legitimises his desire for Lucie, inasmuch as Carton is no longer Carton, but Darnay. The point, of course, is that this castrational redemption is sarcastic: it is not only the *jouissance* of Carton that has to be eliminated, it is Carton himself as well. Carton represents the point of breakdown of the family phantasy, the point of incursion of social and sexual otherness into it, so that the phantasy also has to phantasise Carton's self-disposal.

11. Carton calls himself a “dissolute dog” (p. 253).

12. I have taken this term over from the Slovenian Lacanian Slavoj Žižek, who has taken it from another Slovenian, Mladen Dolar (“Die Einführung in das Serail”, *Wo es war*, Ljubljana-Vienna, 1987). Žižek describes the concept of the subject presumed to enjoy thus: “His role is fundamental in obsessional neurosis: for the obsessional neurotic the traumatic point is the supposed existence, in the other, of an insupportable, limitless, horrifying *jouissance*; the state of all this frantic activity is to protect, to save the Other from his *jouissance*, even at the price of destroying him or her... Again, this subject does not have to exist effectively; to produce his effects, it is enough for others to presume that he exists.” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 187).

Whereas Darnay comes to represent Carton's ego-ideal, throughout the text Carton represents Darnay's repressed other. It is quite telling that in Darnay's letters from prison he "never once thought of /Carton/" (430). So, when somewhat later Darnay is stunned to see Carton in his cell, and misdoubts "him to be an apparition of his own imagining" (432), we know that there is a sense in which this has to be read literally as a phantasy. Anyway, Carton is always there to remind us of antagonisms in Darnay's self-imagining. In this sense we should view Darnay as someone who labours under the fiction of autonomous individuality, presupposing that there is some solid inner substance that fully shapes individual identity and has to be recognised as such. All Darnay's actions reveal a reliance on this fiction, from his renunciation of his aristocratic inheritance and his flight to England to live by his own work, to his return to France to save Gabelle. A closer inspection indicates that all his melodramatic antagonists are in fact those who dispute this fiction of his and lay claim to the right to determine what his identity is. Different social and political orders tailor identities for him: first in England, where he is on trial for being a suspected revolutionary, then in France where he is on trial as an aristocrat. On both these occasions he is saved by Carton, who thus signifies that it is Darnay's very identity that is always being (re)constituted through a *darning*, through a process of supplementation. Darnay's identity is therefore rendered as the very failure to summon itself from within itself, or to put it in Lacanian terms, as the failure to disentangle himself from the symbolic order. In other words, the drama of Darnay's imaginary autonomy and the escapist phantasy of the family romance are referred back to a symbolic register that clearly delineates the antagonistic social and libidinal forces which represent the repressed of that escapist phantasy. It is for this reason that Carton's sacrifice strikes us as grotesquely futile: for in order to become like Darnay, he would still need another Carton.

Carton's sacrifice coincides with the climax of the Terror. In fact, *A Tale* is a story with many endings; for Carton the ending is his prophetic reverie and death, for Darnay it is escape, for France it is the culmination of the Terror. The triple ending is in itself suggestive of a resistance to the melodramatic drift towards moral certainty. Admittedly, it is Carton's wish-fulfillment phantasy that seeks to resolve the antagonisms dramatised in the novel – Carton becomes one of the Darnays, and, on the social plane, the era of the Terror is ended: "I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long long years to come, I see the evil of this time and the previous time to which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out" (465). The family phantasy becomes unconvincing as we realise that the real author of Carton's sacrifice is not Carton, but Darnay – that Carton's sacrifice and redemption in fact articulate Darnay's own phantasy that is meant to mask a certain lack in his self-imagining. But what is one to make of this prophecy of expiation, and this truncated but rather melodramatic narrative of emancipation with which Carton – or rather Darnay as his superego – concludes the social narrative of *A Tale*? Even speaking only technically, the prophecy is ambiguous as to its reference, for which is the exact time of "expiation" – Dickens's own or some indefinite future time? Further indeterminacy is raised by the very subject

and form of the prophecy: not only is its mouthpiece Carton/Darnay, an antagonistic entity in itself, but the form is very much like that of a delegitimised melodramatic narrative that is shown to be an inconsistent ideological phantasy. If Darnay's story desperately seeks reassurance of a happy-ending, so does the social narrative – in Carton's reverie – phantasise closure through a definite settlement of social antagonism. The more *A Tale* strives to achieve a happy-ending, the more it looks like a mockery of happy-ending.

However, the real interest of the historical figuration or of the discourse on history in this text lies in its use of a specific historical phenomenon – the Reign of Terror. In that respect, one can justifiably view *A Tale* as a historical novel in a thematic sense, as a novel that makes a particular real history part of its fictional design. Yet, it is essential to note that there is also a sense in which *A Tale* offers a dystopian narrative: its historical vision does not refer solely to some past real history – it also draws a nightmarish social picture that it sees as a possible future. Dystopia is a narrative genre defined in counter-distinction to utopia: if utopia is a narrative vision that articulates a desire for political or social perfection, dystopia is that kind of narrative which presents the fictional articulation of a social or political nightmare. Both utopia and dystopia respond to a sense of discontent with the existing social order, and point to a lack within it in different ways: utopia diagnoses the lack in the existing civilisation by comparing it with itself, whereas dystopia offers no such comparison but diagnoses the lack as a tendency in the existing civilisation. This means that dystopia understands itself as a diagnosis of what is already in existence, whereas utopia understands itself as a diagnosis of what is lacking in existence.

Dystopia works by presenting itself as a thinly disguised fictional reduplication or hyperbolisation of the nightmarish tendency in the existing society. For instance, Wells's *The Time Machine* contains a dystopian vision that is meant to draw a kind of Darwinian evolutionary conclusion from the Victorian experience of the division of labour. Zamyatin's *We* is a dystopia of totalitarian power clearly based on Soviet social reorganisation. In Orwell's *1984* one can locate a number of dystopian motifs, among them the notion of a total colonisation of subjectivity, which may be linked to cultural fears sprung from the explosive mediatisation of life in mid-XX century. Although a thorough historico-libidinal analysis of the genre would require much more room, I want to propose two short-cut general remarks on it. First, the modern dystopia is a literary symptom of a rather modern occurrence of attempts at or tendencies towards total social control. The representative dystopian fear is that of absolute control, and dystopia always takes as its model a real historical experience, presenting itself as a critique of that experience. Interestingly enough, sometimes the term negative utopia is used as another designation for the genre. Quite properly so, in the sense that dystopia brings out the negative in utopia: dystopia is a presentation of a utopia that has become dystopian. Most dystopias therefore react to utopian historical projects or doctrines that had some crucial social sway: social Darwinism, Soviet communism, scientist utopianism, etc. Secondly, literary dystopias always posit a figure of instability that is suppressed in the dystopian societies they depict – imagination, knowledge, desire, memory, privacy: a number of functional categories that acquire their meaning through being proscribed by the dystopian law. Based on the drive for total control, the dystopian society is constructed on the image of the struggle against the proscribed figure that has

a twofold status in the dystopian narrative: it simultaneously signifies the triumph of total control and resistance to it, however pitiful and inefficient. A literary dystopia is always a socially pessimistic text, yet its pessimism is qualified, as it has to presume a kind of instability and antagonism that resist the project of total control. There is a glimmer of hope in even the grimmest dystopias.

I have to rely – somewhat paradoxically – on one and the same argument to point to the dystopian discourse of *A Tale* and deny that it is generically a dystopian novel. The dystopian vision of society that it projects relies on a real historical experience, the Reign of Terror in the French Revolutionary era. Yet it is precisely for this reason that *A Tale* is not a proper literary dystopia, but at best a precursor to the genre – its rendering of the Terror is not disguised nor displaced onto some fictitious society. In other words, *A Tale* is a historical novel with a dystopian discourse running through it, one that can be described as cautionary about a certain social predicament. It is interesting to perceive, moreover, that the novel works so as to diminish the historical singularity of the event of Terror, from its very beginning when “the best and the worst of times” of 1775 – the time of Lorry’s trip to Dover – is stated to be very much “like the present period” (1); and this results in such a conflation of historical perspectives that the authorial past of 1792 becomes a possible future. The history of the Terror is further desingularised by a systematic disregard for the political fine print of the period. Dickens did look for incidental detail in Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, but unlike Carlyle, who meticulously dwelt on any individual destiny or event that he held important, Dickens depicted his historical subject in broad strokes. *A Tale* contains little allusion to the struggle between the various political factions in the General Assembly and outside, and none of the revolutionary leaders or parties is in fact named. There is but one agent in this revolutionary drama – the mob. In turn, the mob is seen as a product of oppression, and a repeatable product of repeatable oppression at that. This type of anxiety about possible social trends described as a deluge and a horror, as we shall presently see – I conveniently choose to consider as a sign of an emergent dystopian discourse, though not productive of a proper literary dystopia.

The cautionary effect of the novel is sustained throughout by a catastrophism clothed in apparently naturalistic determinism. Peculiarly enough, Dickens insists both on the repeatability of the event of the Terror and its novelty, suggesting the image of a new era that might be marked by recurrence of terror. The very beginning of the Revolution is described as the advent of something new and ominous, as “the sea of black and threatening waters, and of destructive upheaving of wave after wave, whose depths were yet unfathomed and whose forces were yet unknown”. The narrator is here referring to the mob, “a remorseless sea” whose motive force is vengeance and whose faces are “hardened in the furnaces of suffering” (268) – the onrush of popular vengeance is traced back to oppression. The catastrophic tones are unmistakable, and the narrator repeatedly depicts the Revolutionary era in mythic images of elements gone wild: “In such risings of fire and risings of sea – the firm earth shaken by the rushes of an angry ocean which had no ebb, but was always on the flow, to the terror and wonder of the beholders on the shore – three years of tempest were consumed” (286). This mythic register used to explain or rather to serve as an analogy to the revolutionary upheaval is that of the Biblical story of the Deluge: “the deluge of the Year One of Liberty – the deluge rising from below, not falling from above, and with the windows of

Heaven shut, not opened!” (335). This mythic analogising creates a doubly ironic effect. On the one hand, it foregrounds the question of novelty and beginnings, or of the historical promise of the Revolution, which is the promise of liberty. The Biblical deluge marks the beginning of history, and this is exactly the ambition of the jacobin deluge, appropriately expressed by the institution of the new calendar. Yet the narrative is arrested in the midst of the Terror, showing that the promise of liberty is reduced to the practice of destruction. The irony of the new deluge is that it resulted in “long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old” (465). On the other hand, the very Biblical parallel is delegitimised: the Jacobin Terror is a deluge, but one that takes place in a world without God (“with the windows of Heaven shut”).¹³ This new deluge is altogether a social phenomenon, and cannot be measured against a transcendent authority. The result of this Biblical analogy is thus an intimation that the traditional model of historical understanding is spent, and that a transcendence-free notion of history is needed. The Revolution, and specifically the Terror, signify a historical turning-point, a break that announces the beginning of a new era of social dynamics.

A Tale posits a specific socioliberal law to explain the dystopian dynamic that results in the Terror. This law is inscribed with a strong sense of imminence and determinism, through a heavy reliance on natural metaphorisation:

It was too much the way of Monseigneur under his reverses as a refugee, and it was too much the way of native British orthodoxy, to talk of this terrible Revolution as if it were the only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown – as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it – as if the observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it inevitably coming, years before, and had not in plain words recorded what they saw. Such vapouring, combined with the extravagant plots of Monseigneur for the restoration of a state of things that had utterly exhausted itself, and worn out Heaven and earth as well as itself, was hard to be endured without some remonstrance by any sane man who knew the truth. (291)

A very similar harvesting idiom figures in the narratorial contemplation on La Guillotine:

All the devouring and insatiable Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror. Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind. (458)

The Guillotine is thus stated to be a natural consequence of violent oppression and concentration of power that characterised the ancien régime. And this is how Darnay summed up the social reality of the ancien régime: “It is a crumbling tower of waste,

13. The collapse of traditional epistemology and the ancien régime that created a sense of freedom that first took the form of chaos was given an interesting comment by Carlyle, to whose views on the French Revolution Dickens did not “hope to add anything” (Preface to *A Tale*). Carlyle writes: “Very frightful it is when a Nation, rending asunder its Constitutions and Regulations which were grown dead cerements for it, becomes *transcendental*; and must now seek its wild way through the New, Chaotic, – where Force is not yet distinguished into Bidden and Forbidden.” (*The French Revolution*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1921, vol. ii, p. 118). This has also been the subject of Hegel’s analysis in the section on Absolute Freedom and Terror in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

mismanagement, extortion, debt, mortgage, oppression, hunger, nakedness and suffering” (149).¹⁴ Incidentally, these words are spoken in Darnay’s conversation with his uncle Evremonde, who somewhat earlier threatened that he “will die, perpetuating the system under which /he has/ lived” (148). Rather than say that the Marquis is merely being confident in the durability of the ancien régime, we may justifiably speculate that he is voicing some deeper grim knowledge that his system will not die out with the ancien régime, a knowledge that there is a more universal law that operates in different social orders. After all, it is the Marquis who claims that “repression is the only lasting philosophy” (146).

It may therefore be said that *A Tale* delineates a socioliberal determinism – the sterner the repression, the stronger the revolt – which accounts for the violent irruption of the Terror after the long history of violence of the old order. If the ancien régime functioned as a patriarchal-type tyranny in which the feudal lord – or the absolute monarch – was invested with absolute power over his “family” members the Marquis’ murderer is executed as a parricide, “because Monseigneur was the father of his tenants-serfs” (205)), the new revolutionary order with its outbreak of the Terror (which was instituted even before its official declaration) reaches that point where absolute power becomes a political goal again, although with a new historical agent. Just as the old aristocratic order claimed the right to the bodies of its subjects, so the new revolutionary order claims the right to a total control over the social and individual bodies. Dickens makes Darnay come to Paris in August 1792, precisely at the time when the Jacobins started to transform France into a country subject only to the law of revolutionary terror. Within the next year there will follow the September massacres, the institution of the Revolutionary Tribunal, the declaration of the Reign of Terror, and the passing of the famous Law of the Suspect – and Darnay will be tried for the second time precisely at the climax of the Terror in December 1793/January 1794, before a Revolutionary Tribunal, and under the Law of the Suspect. It is a representative totalitarian law that enables a capricious production of enemies, figures presumed to be guilty of creating all the instability in the social body. This is a time when not only the existing prisons were overflowing with suspects, but also the whole city of Paris and the country of France were turned into prisons. Darnay feels this on his journey to Paris in August 1792 as he learns about a series of checkpoints that he has to pass and that would block his way back – he is trapped by a policy of “universal watchfulness” (302), that resulted in “universal fear and distrust”. Another panoptic obsession of the regime of the Terror informs the ordinance that “on the door or door-post of every house, the name of every inmate must be legibly inscribed in letters of a certain size, at a certain convenient height from the ground” (356). This is the moment when the big (br)Other wants to see it all. The individual body is thus made wholly submissive to instruments of control, and this is what lends suspense to the story of Darnay’s imprisonment and escape. The individual body is divested of all power and right, and the corporate body is free to dispose of it spontaneously. Or, as the judge of the Revolutionary Tribunal says to Manette: “As to what is dearer to you than life, nothing can be so dear to a good citizen as the Republic” (391).

14. This description may have been quite telling for Dickens’s audience as well.

A Tale very interestingly concentrates on the work of the Revolutionary Tribunal as a paradigm of the very practice of terror. Darnay's fall into the hands of this "lawless Court" and "dread Tribunal" is followed by meditations on the fearful effects of the revolutionary practice of spontaneous democracy:

A revolutionary tribunal in the capital, and forty or fifty thousand revolutionary committees all over the land; a law of the Suspected, which struck away all security for liberty or life, and delivered any good or innocent person to any bad and guilty one; prisons gorged with people who had committed no offence, and could obtain no hearing; these things became the established order and nature of appointed things, and seemed to be ancient usage before they were many weeks old. Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world – the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine. (336)

This circuit of revolutionary law created and legalised the rule of the mob, with its "fickleness" and "inconsistency as monstrous as anything in this awful nightmare" (333). Whereas the embodiments of the Republic, the Committees of Public Health and Revolutionary Tribunals, pretend to rule innocently, that is, immediately and wholly embodying the "People", *A Tale* draws attention to the devastating effects of this ideology of immediate embodiment of the popular will, which authorises the rule of caprice, fear and violence, allowing for a spontaneous – arbitrary and capricious – visitation of vengeance on the presumed "enemies of the Republic". In this respect, it is tempting to see this dystopian focus of *A Tale* as one of the first modern studies of totalitarianism. I have in mind a particular definition of totalitarianism, implied by Slavoj Žižek in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek proposes the following definition of democracy: "a sociopolitical order in which the People do not exist – do not exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative".¹⁵ Žižek arrives at this definition discussing the totalitarian order, so that the definition of totalitarianism would accordingly be: a sociopolitical order in which the People do exist – exist as a unity, embodied in their unique representative. Of course, the only characteristic that defines the People in totalitarian discourse is its oneness with its immediate embodiment. The People is the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committee of Public Health, and the People always support these immediate embodiments of theirs, because those that do not are not the People, but "enemies of the Republic". The story of Darnay's fate in France dramatises this process of totalitarianism through the establishment of a unique popular embodiment and through the capricious production – and destruction – of popular enemies.¹⁶

It is by foregrounding a contiguity between the revolutionary utopian drives and their dystopian realisations that *A Tale* underscores the devastating practice of the Jacobins. The very revolutionary motto of the Jacobin Republic is exposed for its

15. Žižek, p. 147.

16. This of course, raises the question of the relationship between melodramatic desire and the politics of terror. It may be said that terror is a radical politicisation of the melodramatic drive, sharply polarising the political sphere and into the "people" and the "enemies of the people", and daemonising the latter. The Terror did understand itself as the dictatorship of virtue. There is obviously a melodramatic text in the practice of Terror, and any totalitarian practice. Yet this does not mean that literary melodrama is in itself totalitarian, though it is undoubtedly highly self-righteous. It can only become totalitarian if it serves a totalitarian practice. Anyway, it is interesting that Dickens locates his family melodrama in the context of the French Revolution, the Period that gave birth to melodrama.

dystopian performance: “Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death; – the last, much the easiest to bestow, O Guillotine” (338). The motto and name of the Republic One and Indivisible are repeated so often, as an ominous chorus to the violent developments of Terror, that one begins to wonder whether this linguistically ambiguous programme should be read as “indivisible” in itself, with the “or” standing for identification rather than disjunction. At any rate, when Carton asks of the Jacobin woodsawyer “How goes the Republic?”, the identification is complete as the woodsawyer replies: “You mean the Guillotine. Not ill. Sixty-three today. We shall mount to a hundred soon. Samson and his men complain sometimes of being exhausted. Ha, ha, ha! He is so droll, that Samson. Such a Barber” (385). The cynical oneness of liberty and death in the motto is thus highlighted as the very programme of the Terror. Incidentally, Jacques Lacan also points to this oneness to designate the Hegelian moment of Terror: “Curiously enough, in the conditions in which someone says to you, *freedom or death!*, the only proof of freedom that you can have in the conditions laid out before you is precisely to choose death, for there, you show that you have freedom of choice”.¹⁷ In other words, the performative outcome of the slogan is always the same, and whatever is chosen it is death that follows. Lacan’s argument may be a little elliptic, but it points to a hypostatization of the notion of freedom that has to be understood in the light of Lacan’s Hegelian inspiration. In the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* there is a section on a kind of self-consciousness that Hegel calls absolute freedom – the unmediated, general freedom of the revolutionary motto. It is an abstract form of self-consciousness, “which effaces all distinction and all continuance of distinction within it”, and for it the world is “simply its own will, and this is a general will”.¹⁸ In the Hegelian universe, where truth and value only appear out of mediation, through a dialectic of alienation, this stance of absolute freedom as an immediate self-identity of the universal will is of course guilty of a misrecognition. It is a misrecognition that directly leads to terror, for this notion of absolute or universal freedom “can produce neither a positive work or deed; there is left for it only *negative* action; it is merely the fury of destruction”,¹⁹ and “The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death*.”²⁰ This terrorism of absolute freedom is manifested for Hegel in its drive to implement its own notion of itself, i.e. to abolish all difference in the social world, as it is a presumption of a general will. This effectively means the politics of destruction that Hegel himself may have witnessed in French revolutionary government. The presumption of spontaneous, immediate freedom necessarily yields the equation between freedom and death, and we have seen that it is much the same insight that informs the discourse on the Terror in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Seen in this light, *A Tale* may be said to depict the moment of the totalitarian irruption of the death drive. The doctrine that “extermination is a good doctrine” (419)

213. 17. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Penguin, London, 1986, p.

18. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 361.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

accurately sums up the terroristic notion of freedom. But apart from this kind of death drive that characterises Madame Defarge and the Terror, and that is primarily aggressive towards the other(s), the novel also focuses on another kind of death drive, one which is aggressive towards the self, and which characterises Carton. In a way, Carton's suicide is the point of refraction of a whole series of figurative relations that turn upon the death drive. The novel goes back to a time "when putting to death was a recipe much in vogue". This remark occurs in a curious passage with a double theme – the *grave* banking business of Tellson's that turns its employees into barren old men – of which Lorry is an example, and the theme of the morbid 18th century punitive legislation which knew but one verdict: "Death is Nature's remedy for all things, and why not Legislation's" (61). The heavy irony of this pronouncement obviously strives to de-legitimise the policy that legislation has no other business but to dispense death. In such a culture of death, the irruption of the death drive represented in the legislative practices of the Terror – the context of Carton's death – comes as no great surprise, but is a rather typical cultural occurrence. Dickens persistently builds the picture of a culture in the grip of a destructive dynamic, within which the advent of the Terror is to be viewed as a likely result. The often bitter irony shows that for Dickens this cultural tendency was not of antiquarian interest: it is significant for him, because he finds it still possible.

Another morbid 18th century phenomenon to stir Dickens's imagination, and one that extended well into the 19th century, was so-called resurrectionism. In the character of Jerry Cruncher, "an honest tradesman", *A Tale* introduces a bystory not very rich in incident, but very productive in bizzare analogies that it slaps on the more central story lines. Cruncher's trade of body-snatching provides a portentous counterpoint to individual and collective destinies in the novel. As a metaphor for unlawful possession, Cruncher's secret occupation parallels the terroristic policy of assuming total control over individual bodies: body-snatching is informed by the same drive to make all private space transparent, wholly occupiable. Equally interesting is the fabric of sarcasm that shrouds Carton's suicide into the resurrection analogy. The semic paradigm set up by Cruncher's occupation ironises the redemptive and sacralising thrust of Carton's resurrection as one of Darnay's in his premortal reverie. The melodramatic drive seeks to redeem the very act of Carton's redemption – his suicide, by phantasising Carton's resurrection in the form of reconciliation with the Darnay norm. But the very notion of resurrection has already been rendered suspicious by Cruncher's precedent: resurrection that is virtually no more than an ironic term for body-snatching. Carton's resurrection is thus presented as a phantasy that endeavours to cover up for the initial fact of the loss of his body and life to Darnay. The narrative episode of their prison exchange makes this point clear: the name of Darnay – the melodramatic phantasy whose triumph should be secured – snatches away the body of Carton.

Carton and Darnay, as we have seen already, are actors in the same game of identity. So, when Darnay on the death row finds himself unable to resist "a strange besetting desire to know what to do when the time came" – a suggestion of his death wish – and when this drive is described as "a wondering that was more like the wandering of some other spirit within his, than his own" (431), it can be speculated that this other spirit is again Carton. Darnay's fascination with the moment of death by La Guillotine is displaced onto Carton, who actually turns up in prison somewhat later to replace

Darnay, and free him from the experience. What is at stake here is a sociosymbolic theory of the death drive. Early on in *A Tale* we find that Carton is possessed by a self-destructive force – a force ambiguously coded as “dissolution”. His final words mark the end of his quest for rest: “it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known” (466). And during the time of his acquaintance with Lucie, Carton announces his resolution to sacrifice his life for her or her family. From the viewpoint of the family melodrama, it would be convenient to contain this drive within the peculiarity of Carton’s psyche, to make it his own responsibility, his own inner substance. But the Carton/Darnay interchange works in such a way as to show that Carton’s death wish is but an expression of his ego-ideal. It is because Carton adopts Darnay as his ego-ideal that he thinks himself undeserving of Lucie in the first place. This adoption then obviously takes a negative form, as Carton seeks to sacrifice himself as a deviation from his ego-ideal. In this equation it becomes evident that his death wish is in fact what his ego-ideal means to him. In this way *A Tale* states that it is a particular ideological phantasy that phantasises Carton’s death wish for him. Carton enacts his imaginary identification with Darnay for the gaze of an Other – the gaze of Darnay, Lucie, the melodramatic phantasy. In other words, Carton’s death wish is none other than that melodramatic gaze.

As Brooks claims, one of the crucial points of the melodramatic mode is the spectacle of virtue. The moment of anagnorisis has to arrive, a collective gaze must be there to evidence virtue. In *A Tale* this quest for the reassuring gaze of recognition is brought to an impasse of misrecognition. Namely, the death-for-Carton phantasy of the melodramatic gaze rewrites Carton’s final reverie of recognition as a misrecognition, as Carton enters the limbo of someone else’s phantasy that he mistakes for his own. Importantly enough, the settlement of the melodramatic drive is followed by a failure of the melodramatic gaze, for there remains almost literally no one to witness Carton’s “redemption”, except the young seamstress who dies before him on the Guillotine, for the circumstances demand that he should be hidden from the public gaze as Carton, because he now enacts Darnay. This absence of recognition can scarcely be interpreted as some ultimate triumph of virtue through its complete internalisation, or as an affirmation of some fundamental private ethic: on the contrary, at this point Dickens speaks in unison with the psychoanalytical insight that “the ego is always an alter-ego”.²¹ Furthermore, the failure of Darnay to attract a melodramatic gaze is even more evident: his escape from death withdraws him back into the shrunken community of his family, where the only gaze is his own. If twice in court he was released in a public spectacle, his final release is merely a flight into secrecy, and under an assumed identity. Paradoxically, it is only the gaze of Carton that pretends to legitimise Darnay’s triumph, which is the gaze of an other that needs to be expelled from the family phantasy, as the gaze of the subject presumed to enjoy. But it is also the gaze of a subject *presumed* to desire death, a subject constructed by a phantasy of Carton’s self-elimination from the family melodrama.

21. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book ii. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 321.

We can now qualify our earlier claim that *A Tale* formulates a sociosymbolic theory of the death drive, in the sense that it demands interpretation within a psychoanalytical code, and even anticipates that code. Indeed, its study of the destructive drive – the aggression of the Terror and the self-destructiveness of Carton – may be considered protopschoanalytical in character, for it proposes a model of sociolibidinal dynamics in order to account for the phenomenon of destructiveness. Freud first formulated his concept of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as a part of a “metapsychological” speculation on the processes of libidinal economy. In opposition to Eros or life instincts Freud presumed the existence of death or destructive drives. Starting from a hypothesis on the conservative nature of all instincts, which means that the goal of all drives is to keep the amount of excitation in the mental apparatus “constant or as low as possible”,²² Freud arrived at the suggestion that the death drive is beyond the pleasure principle, or that the pleasure principle serves the death drive. Both Eros and Thanatos aim at the removal of tension, but, as Fredric Jameson succinctly puts it, “it is as though Thanatos, exasperated by the half-measures of Eros, whose momentary satisfactions merely result in the inevitable return of just those tensions and excitations it was supposed to lay to rest, now decided to go all the way with the latter’s program, and to apply it so thoroughly that the irritation of organic life would once and for all be made an end to.”²³ Jameson argues that the object of the death drive is not physical mortality, but rather “*aphanisis*, asexuality, the radical extinction of sexual desire itself, /a/ serene and organic indifference”.²⁴ Freud himself did not want to reduce the death drive to some pure, uncompromising striving towards physical death; he suggests also that there is a way in which the death drive serves the life drive, because it is in its interest to keep the living organism alive, so that it can manifest its programme – “the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion”. The death drive does not necessarily work against self-preservative instincts, which, paradoxically, therefore “were the myrmidons of death”.²⁵ Yet, Freud must have felt that this line of argument was confined within an intimate psychology, i.e. a model of libidinal economy limited to the libidinal circuit of an isolated ego, and that in this way the metapsychology of *Beyond* could easily slip into some simplistic biological fundamentalism. Namely, in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* Freud proposed a slightly different theory of the drives, by investigating their functioning not any longer within a biological individual, but in the context of civilisation and intersubjectivity. While in *Beyond* Freud did argue that Eros is a social drive whose aim is “to combine organic substances into ever larger unities”,²⁶ this argument was dimmed by the focus still being mainly on the conservative nature of instincts and their presumed dynamic within some intimate mental logic. In *Civilisation* this changes, and the question of the drives is raised with respect to their sociolibidinal logic. Freud states now that the conflict between Eros and Thanatos “is set going as soon as men are faced with the task of living together”.²⁷ Eros is primarily defined as a force of civilisation: “civilisation is a

22. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Bantam Books, New York, 1972, p. 108.

23. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, Wyndhem Lewis, the *Modernist As Fascist*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, p. 168.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

25. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 72.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

27. *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, p. 79.

process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, than races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind”. Opposed to this drive is an inclination to aggression, which is “an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ... it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilisation”.²⁸ The death drive is designated as the antisocial drive. Freud’s metapsychology moved in this text towards a sociolibidinal analysis, in which both drives are assigned a differential definition, rather than a fundamentalist one. Admittedly, Freud’s discourse still smacked of a kind of monadic biologism, but the sociolibidinal drift of his argument shows a tendency to break into a metapsychological realm beyond the presumption of a biological automatism. In this connection, it may be argued that the death drive is precisely this phantasy of some bio-determinism, i.e. a phantasy of the renunciation of the symbolic order – or civilisation, in Freud’s terms. In short, the death drive is the phantasy of the destruction of the symbolic universe itself. This is also the way in which we should read Jameson’s notion of the death drive as aiming at aphanisis – by tracing it back to the Lacanian notion of desire. Lacan defines desire as the insatiable effect of the subject’s inclusion into the symbolic order – desire is set in motion always as the desire of the other, through the very structure of the symbolic universe which is such that the subject can never fully appropriate it. This means that within a Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse the death drive is to be understood as a drive aiming at absolute freedom from the symbolic order, inasmuch as the symbolic order is what constitutes our experience of “reality”. The death drive phantasises a return to some presymbolic immediacy that would grant absence of irritation or antagonism – the very conditions of existence in the symbolic order, which is what constitutes the experience of the subject. The psychoanalytic death drive is inscribed with the same meaning of pure, immediate negativity that characterises the notion of absolute freedom in Hegelian phenomenology: both notions are informed by the idea of some immediate self-identity that seeks to annihilate all symbolic mediation. As a phantasy of presymbolic immediacy, the death drive cannot – paradoxically enough – be simply abolished, for the drive for its abolishment would merely be a repetition and a manifestation of it. The subject – or culture – cannot have any immediate or final solutions to their antagonisms. For Žižek the death drive itself is Symbolic – it signifies the very split character of the subject, that leftover or remnant in it that escapes symbolisation – an imbalance or a traumatic kernel that is constitutive of the subject, and the negative condition of the subject’s desire. Desire can only work through the failure of the Symbolic order to fully represent the subject – this is the very condition of subjectivity. This is why Žižek writes: “the ‘death drive’, this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines *la condition humaine* as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it – to learn to recognise it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate *a modus vivendi* with it. All ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalise – to *cultivate* this imbalance... It is not only that the aim is no longer to abolish this drive antagonism, but the aspiration to abolish it is precisely the

28 Ibid., p. 69.

source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension”.²⁹

In its study of terror, *A Tale of Two Cities* dwells on a politics that has succumbed to this totalitarian temptation, grotesquely amplifying aggression and destruction in the name of a more just, free, harmonious society. Terror is studied as a destructive irruption of the politics of spontaneity which seeks to annihilate the symbolic, differential, mediating character of political life, and establishes a tyranny of the People over the people. The Tribunal does not represent the people – it is the people, functioning as a legitimising network for the “fickleness” of the populace – and the fickleness here is to be interpreted as that absolute freedom unbound by any “civilisation”. The Tribunal is the instrument of the drive to achieve the utopian programme of liberty, equality, fraternity through dispensation of death for the “suspects” and “enemies” – those presumed by the totalitarian phantasy to create antagonism and cause destruction. In order to fulfil its vision of society without antagonism, the Terror displaces all social antagonisms and indeed the very notion of antagonism on the figure of the enemy, an alien element corrupting the otherwise sound popular body – the Committees of Public Health were not accidentally named. Of special interest here is the socioliberal dynamic that Dickens postulates in order to account for the outbreak of the Terror. The Terror is seen as a direct consequence of the ancien regime, an exemplification of a very simple law: the sterner the repression, the stronger the revolt. This is what feeds the dystopian fears of the return of terror, that so strongly mark the prophetic discourse of the novel. On the other hand, *A Tale* also recognises the uniqueness of the Terror as a historical phenomenon, i.e. it recognises the way its practices sprang from the historical moment of absolute freedom which meant a liberation from previous authority, but simultaneously a lapse into the terroristic ideology of immediacy. It is this duality that fully describes the horror of terror for Dickens: not only is the Terror a misrecognition of freedom at the moment of the breakdown of transcendence, it can also be reenacted under repeatable circumstances.

Unlike this panoramic drama of the Terror, the repression of Carton is situated in a different drama that pretends to be staged within the realm of intimacy. We should note that the repression of Madame Defarge and the repression of Carton are not strictly analogous, i.e. the repression of Carton should not be seen as that new prophesied repression that will bring about another chain-reaction of violence. *A Tale* is dealing with two levels of repression here, social and ideological. The social repression that breeds Terror is postulated as a possibility, a latent constant within some historical socioliberal poetics. As viewed by this novel, Terror is always tendentially possible, like Freud’s feared failure to master the disturbance of civilisation by the death drive. The repression of Carton, on the other hand, is a specific ideological phantasy, required by a specific cultural and narrative ideogeme, the family melodrama. By dissecting the melodramatic phantasy *A Tale* seeks to rob its audience of its presumed self-righteousness, or rather, expose a self-righteousness presumed by this narrative paradigm. For in this melodrama, in spite of all its focus on Manette, Lucie and Darnay,

29. Žižek, p. 5.

the real hero is Carton. His double characterisation as a subject presumed to enjoy and a subject presumed to desire death maps the processes of the melodramatic phantasy that seeks intimacy with a moral universe, or rather a moral universe within an intimacy – the intimacy of the family theatre. Carton, to use a Lacanian expression, points to the ex-timacy of this phantasy, revealing that its search for an intimate morality is actually centrifugal and merely masks its instability. The family phantasy is thus presented as an unsuccessful flight into interiority – and one whose libidinal accountancy continually demands sacrifice from an other, and keeps projecting its death drives onto it. The aphanisis of Carton, his construction as a subject presumed to desire death, unfolds as a darning of the fabric of the family phantasy, covering up for the failure of the phantasy to disguise effectively its own inconsistency, let alone remove it.

The double concern of *A Tale* – the dystopian reality of Terror and the morbid melodramatic phantasy – conveys a sense of fatality, such as could be evidenced in other Dickens's late novels, but rarely with this precision and clarity. On the one hand *A Tale* seems to communicate a sense of impending social catastrophe, due to a vision of society that is impregnated with the ever explosive death drive. Another kind of fatality informs the relationship between Carton and Darnay in the family phantasy – both cannot break out of their imaginaries, and they do not even attempt to do that, but rather follow their imaginary destinies with dogged determination. They are conformists whose respective roles in the family romance reflect a recognisably mid-Victorian conviction about the solidity and durability of social divisions and configurations of the time. But this fatalism includes its own twin speak: *A Tale* attempts to mark the limitations of fatalism precisely by investigating the sociolibidinal dynamics that set it in motion. Because for Dickens, as for Freud, it is only by mapping the sociolibidinal dynamic of the death drive that it is possible to think beyond the politics of violence.

ANALIZA AGRESIVNOSTI U ROMANU *A TALE OF TWO CITIES*

Roman *A Tale of Two Cities* Charlesa Dickensa zanimljiv je zbog svoje neobične mješavine obiteljske priče i uznemirujuće povijesne vizije utemeljene na vladavini Terora u Francuskoj revoluciji. Ova analiza ima dva osnovna cilja. Prvo, da istraži način na koji se roman bavi melodramatskom obiteljskom fantazijom. Drugo, da istraži glavne karakteristike studije Terora u ovom romanu. Naglasak je na načinu na koji ovaj tekst, anticipirajući psihoanalizu, opisuje sociolibidinalnu dinamiku destruktivnih nagona koji obilježavaju i melodramatsku ideologemu i politiku Terora.