Bad Timing: Cliffhangers and Historical Crisis in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

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Abstract

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“Bad Timing: Cliffhangers and Historical Crisis in Nineteenth-Century Fiction” argues that the cliffhanger became central to the historical novel’s effort to represent historical crisis and change in the nineteenth century. In the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, the acceleration of technological, social, and political changes produced a general sense of historical disorientation – a sense that time itself was somehow out of joint. The historical novel sought to mediate this widespread sense of historical rupture by scrutinizing historical turning points and plotting more tangible relations between past and present, in an attempt to give coherence and meaning to bewildering historical changes. I argue that what we now call the cliffhanger was a key element of this project, because the cliffhanger offered a way to reproduce a sense of rupture and acceleration in the actual scene of reading. By dramatically halting the story to frame an imminent crisis, the cliffhanger offered an efficient means of isolating and analyzing narrative turning points. In chapters on the classical historical novel (Walter Scott), its mid-century re-configuration under the regime of realism (Charles Dickens), and its late-century heirs (the adventure fiction of Ballantyne, Haggard, and Stevenson), I argue that the cliffhanger represented a way for novelists in the nineteenth century to pose larger questions about the experience of historical time.
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1. Pause: On the Dynamics of the Cliffhanger

Every written work is constructed around a question and progresses in such a way that it can suddenly stop at the edge of an abyss – suddenly, unexpectedly, yet with compelling force….This is the most profound meaning of form: to lead to a great moment of silence, to mold the directionless, precipitous, many-colored stream of life as though all its haste were only for the sake of such moments….A question, with life all around it; a silence, with a rustling, a noise, a music, a universal singing all around it; that is form.

~ Georg Lukács, Soul & Form

Scheherazade is a frequent figure in discussions of narrative form, but as yet we have few sustained accounts of her signature device, for despite its ubiquity, the cliffhanger has, until recently, escaped critical scrutiny for the most part.¹ Our critical lacuna warrants redress, and this study aims to help by demonstrating that cliffhangers are worthy of analysis. And not simply because they are so prevalent in many of the stories we consume; cliffhangers in fact perform functions central to the way many narratives work. Most importantly, they compel readers to experience narrative time in surprisingly diverse ways.

Cliffhangers are remarkably adaptable devices, amenable to translation from one medium to another. Yet across their many instantiations, they nonetheless share many common features, suggesting that the device is best understood not as the convention of a particular medium (like television), genre (like melodrama), or system of distribution (like serialization), but rather as a more fundamental narrative technique, something intrinsic to the act of storytelling. Cliffhangers do certain things very well: they focus readerly attention, highlight narrative tensions and instabilities, and maneuver the reader’s affective responses within narrative progressions. And whether one is inclined to view the device as a thrilling storytelling flourish or a cheap trick, the pull of the cliffhanger is difficult to resist. Whether we like them or not, cliffhangers deserve our critical attention, I will argue, because they tend to work.

I should note at the outset that, given the historical focus of this study, my key term is itself anachronistic. The term “cliffhanger” was coined in the 1930’s to describe the chapter-plays produced by Hollywood studios like Republic, Columbia, and Universal – serial adventures featuring harrowing catastrophes and near-death scrapes. At this point, the term was essentially used to name a genre of suspenseful, serial entertainment, as well as the sorts of situations and scenarios most paradigmatic of that genre: the engine of a plane cutting out, the brakes of a fast-moving vehicle malfunctioning, etc. The OED defines the cliffhanger in essentially this sense, as “a serial film in which each episode ends in a desperate situation; hence, any story, play, etc., in which suspense is a main concern.”

But this is not really what we mean when we use the term today (the definition has not been updated since it appeared in 1972). A cliffhanger is not a type of story the way a potboiler or a whodunit is, and it is certainly not confined to a specific form or medium, as its origin in the film industry might suggest. Nor is it the case that all stories concerned with suspense trade in cliffhangers. Suspense is an emotion that narratives produce in manifold ways, and arguably a central concern for all narratives. But not all suspenseful moments, nor all suspenseful endings, are cliffhangers. Though the cliffhanger often creates suspenseful effects, it does many other things as well, as this study will show.

This study conceives of the cliffhanger not as the production of a particular narrative genre, media, or system of distribution or consumption, but rather as a storytelling device that is made possible by the fundamental premise of narrative itself: the distinction between story (some series of events) and discourse (the presentation of those events in a particular order, with a beginning, middle, and end). Insofar as all narratives are constituted by the distinction between story and discourse, they are all capable of employing cliffhangers. Thus, it should come as no surprise that we find cliffhangers in ancient and modern texts, and in realist fiction as well as more sensational genres; they are as likely to frame terrific events (like characters hanging from cliffs) as mundane actions (like characters opening or closing doors).

New Yorker television critic Emily Nussbaum offers one of the better definitions of the cliffhanger when she describes it as a “climax cracked in half,” and this gets at several important aspects of the device. By focusing on the cliffhanger’s tendency to set on narrative climax, Nussbaum remains agnostic concerning the kinds of stories it is available to, while highlighting the role that discursive presentation plays in creating a cliffhanger – it is “cracked in half,” which is to say, spread out over multiple installments, or discursive units of a narrative. However, what Nussbaum’s description does not really account for is the device’s capacity to mislead – to generate the appearance of a climax that isn’t actually there. And this ability, in my view, is

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2 The OED finds the first instance of the term in 1936. Guy Barefoot finds that although early usage of the term most often referred to serial film, it isn’t restricted to the serial. Feature-length Westerns, as well as crime thrillers and radio programs were also sometimes referred to as cliffhangers. See Barefoot, The Lost Jungle, and also Louise M. Ackerman “Cliffhanger.” American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage 37.2 (1962), 157.


4 On the cliffhanger’s relation to suspense and other narrative emotions, see Baroni, “Le cliffhanger: un révélateur des fonctions et du fonctionnement du récit mimétique.”

5 Seymour Chatman popularized the terms “story” and “discourse,” but the distinction they describe (between the what in a narrative and the how, as Chatman puts it) has been central to pretty much every major work of narrative theory. See Chatman, Story and Discourse (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19. For a comprehensive and historically sensitive account of the myriad ways this distinction has been thought and rethought over the years, see Kent Puckett, Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016).

6 “Tune in Next Week,” New Yorker (30 July 2012), 70.
central to the cliffhanger’s unique (and often frustrating) power: it sharpens certain expectations about the story’s imminent future, while keeping us stuck in the narrative present, where we can’t verify them. And as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, this sense of restraint, of the story rushing on as the reader is left behind, is crucial to the conceptual relations the device uniquely capable of outlining.

It is also a key reason the device appealed to the authors that make up the core of this study. Although, as this introduction will show, the device has a long history, my central claim will be that the cliffhanger became most critical at a moment in the history of the novel when the novel itself was invested in making sense of an experience of historical time very much like the one described above: the sense that things were speeding on towards an unwelcome, imminent future, and people were somehow stuck – stranded in the present, to use historian Peter Fritzsche’s phrase.7 By the early nineteenth century, in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the acceleration of social change in Britain and on the Continent was producing a widespread sense that the present was veering off toward some uncertain future, disconnected from the past. The historical novel emerged in this context, and sought to mediate this feeling of historical rupture by narrating the past’s relation to the present, thus giving analogous recent historical changes coherence and meaning. The cliffhanger, I will argue, was central to this project, because it offered a means of isolating the pivotal moments – the crisis moments – at which these changes seemed to be clinched, while at the same time generating an authentic affective sense of their timing. The cliffhanger could grant diffuse and distended processes of change experiential weight by focusing them into a crucial, identifiable moment, while simultaneously reproducing a sense of crisis in the actual scene of reading – dramatically halting the narrative just as the story seems to veer towards a turning point. These abrupt, dramatic halts were used to prompt specific questions about causality and probability, and link local crises with larger developments in the totality of the story. In other words, the cliffhanger offered a means to distill wide-ranging historical changes into a single pregnant moment, and thus to make those changes tangible, even visceral. Though in the twentieth century the cliffhanger would become a byword for the cheap, commodified thrills of mass entertainment, in the nineteenth century it appealed to historical novelists because it could make the very texture of history available to readers.

This study, then, has two goals: on the one hand, to provide an account of the formal complexity and narrative utility of an unjustly-neglected device; on the other, to uncover the cliffhanger’s role in the novel’s ongoing effort to mediate historical change. Of course, the cliffhanger’s place in the historical novel changes as the historical novel itself changes, so this study tracks the device through three stages in the life of the historical novel over the course of the nineteenth century – the period in which the form was most prominent in the literary field. I begin with the “classical” form of the historical novel in the work of Walter Scott, the writer who, by claiming whole new domains for novelistic representation, established the form’s potential. Scott’s interest in the cliffhanger emerges from his engagement with the painterly aesthetics of “momentaneousness” in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, the last and most pessimistic of his “Scottish” novels. Championed by the painter Henry Fuseli, whose lectures on the principle are ventriloquized at the start of the novel, momentaneousness described a painting’s ability to represent weighty, pregnant moments such that they effectively disclose whole narrative sequences: pasts, presents, and futures. In *The Bride*, Scott adapts this sort of momentaneousness

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for the novel by means of the cliffhanger. But where, for Fuseli, the momentaneous moment has the power to clarify scenes and bring whole series of events to light, in Scott’s novel, the cliffhanger becomes associated with problems of timing, and the propensity of such enlightening moments to lead the observer astray. Scott links momentaneity to a sense of history as a disruptive and disorienting force – something that binds the principal characters in a cycle of confusion and misunderstanding. In a characteristically deflating anti-climax, Scott builds to a momentaneous cliffhanger to visit this force of history on the reader herself, catching her in the same temporal confusion as the characters.

I then move from Scott to Charles Dickens, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Published at a moment when the historical novel’s command of the literary field was waning (edged to the margin by the ascendant regime of realism), Dickens returns to the historical event that, in a sense, inaugurates the form itself: the French Revolution. The result, I argue, is a novel concerned not with origins, but rather with endings, and their insufficiency in resolving historical or narrative processes. Where Scott displayed a thoroughly dialectical sense of historical experience, in which the individual destinies of characters are shaped by public events, and public events are made tangible by way of their effects on characters, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the dialectic gives way to more static antagonism, announced portentously in the novel’s famous opening lines: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…” The loss of the dialectic spells the loss of the possibility of a productive, synthesizing ending in the historical novel, and the cliffhanger functions as the sign of this loss. As a device that foregrounds its own refusal to resolve a narrative sequence, the cliffhanger crystallizes a more general anxiety about endings, figured in the novel by Madame Defarge’s extermination discourse on the one hand, and the many characters who return from the grave on the other. *A Tale’s* cliffhangers put the importance of endings front and center, by noticeably failing to perform this function.

Finally, I conclude by turning to late-Victorian imperial adventure fiction, which, I argue, should be understood as the heir to the historical novel. To explain this shift, I trace the emergence of race as an explanatory historical discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century. Where deep social differences had once been understood as the products of historical conflicts and changes, such differences became increasingly understood as inborn, inherent, biological. And as the new ideology of race replaced socio-historical accounts of uneven development, it offered a broader justification for empire, such that Britain’s rule became “naturalized,” in multiple senses of the word. Adventure fiction, with its excursions out to the margins of the Empire and its grounding of narrative in the physical body of the protagonist, became the genre best-suited to explore this new “historical” terrain. And just as the material that constitutes history changes in adventure fiction, so too does the cliffhanger, which now becomes incapable of signaling true narrative change. The outsized spectacle of the adventure cliffhanger (in which the protagonist’s life is invariably threatened) belies a more fundamental stasis in the narrative system, which is essentially incapable of generating true alternatives. Adventure generates the hardened, clichéd form of the device and cedes it to early Hollywood cinema, which draws on precisely these stories when it coins the term “cliffhanger.” Here, then, at the end of the nineteenth century, the cliffhanger becomes little more than a feint – a means of consolidating a story we already know about the world.
Together then, these chapters trace a transformation in the novel’s ambitions with regards to the representation of history, and it will be helpful to sketch these transformations at the outset. Scott’s fiction generally balances two different historical modes, only one of which was sustained by serious fiction in his wake. On the one hand, there is the antiquarian sense of historical life as that which is revealed in the everyday manners, customs, and habits of particular communities at particular times; on the other, a more dynamic sense of the larger movements of history. The antiquarian impulse was anthropological at root, and allowed Scott to immerse his readers in concrete social worlds, inviting them to luxuriate in a synchronic view of the period, a cross-section of an era at a particular moment. But these whole, complete worlds, reconstructed with the care and good humor of the antiquarian, inevitably find themselves at moments of historical conflict and crisis – transitions between historical stages, in which one social order finds itself directly challenged by another. Adapted from Scottish Enlightenment theories of stadial and conjectural history, this second historical vision tends to emphasize upheaval, and constituted a very different temporal mode – one that regards history as an unfolding series of (often) painful changes. Together, the antiquarian and the more fitful sense of history allowed Scott to bring the reader’s own present into a defined relation with the past by representing that past as “the concrete precondition of the present.”

Scott’s readers are granted the means to grasp their own lived experience – their everyday habits, customs, and manners – as the real product of the conflicts of the past.

By the middle of the century, however, when Charles Dickens, at the height of his powers, returns to the historical novel with *A Tale of Two Cities*, Victorian realism had largely claimed dominion over the first strand of Scott’s representation of history – the local habits and customs of precisely situated communities – and rejected the second. Realist novels excised the public crisis, the national event, and the historical turning point from the narrative repertoire. At the same time, they moved the scene of action closer to the reader’s present, setting stories in the more recent past of the author’s youth (roughly thirty, rather than sixty years since – a shift anticipated by Scott in *The Antiquary*, published in 1816 and set in the 1790s). Realism thus retained and developed what Ian Duncan describes as the “historical attunement to everyday life as the evolving medium of experience and memory, knowledge and feeling, sympathy and antagonism, through which a social world reproduces itself.”

By severing the real of lived experience from the political, economic, and military struggles that shaped it on the one hand, and bringing the story closer to the date of publication on the other, Victorian realism asserted its relevance on very different grounds than Scott’s fiction had. Rather than the concrete precondition of the present, Victorian realism provided something more like a meticulous reconstruction of the recent past. As an 1859 article in *Bentley’s Miscellany* puts it, the appeal of historical fiction lay in “the occasion it gives for making us familiar with the every-day life of

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8 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 21. Critics tend to prefer the phrase “prehistory of the present,” a phrase Lukács uses later on in *The Historical Novel*. But to my mind, the earlier formulation cited above – “concrete precondition” – better captures Scott’s sense of the present as something that does not simply follow the past chronologically, but is actually made possible by that past. What Lukács admires about Scott is the way he depicts the past not simply as prehistory, but as the very condition of possibility for the present.

the age and country in which the scene is laid.”

But by privileging the everyday at the expense of the extraordinary, realism forfeited that second strand of Scott’s project – the representation of history experienced as impending crisis or catastrophe. This second strand of Scott’s narrative project (the impulse that excited Marx and Lukács in particular) was the representation of history as a process of progress and decline, a movement that shaped the character of everyday life, and accounted for the survival of some social orders at the expense of others.

Richard Maxwell helpfully casts these two historical perspectives as synchronic and diachronic temporal modes, respectively, and we will see synchronic and diachronic impulses blended in different proportions and configurations over the course of this study. Synchronic antiquarianism catalogues the everyday to generate an idealized sense of place, capable of overcoming the temporal distance between ages by evoking nostalgic associations rooted in particular localities. As Maxwell writes, “The dream of antiquarian recovery, where one wanders in the past as in an illuminated diary…may not reveal the past as it actually was…All the same, this seemingly distant era (no more than yesterday disguised) creates a mood of reverence associated with social, cultural, and ultimately national oneness” (63). This “dream of antiquarian recovery” sought to emphasize cultural continuity by depicting a heritable tradition, a set of customs in which the reader could recognize echoes of his own tastes and sensibilities.

The diachronic impulse in Scott, on the other hand, seeks out moments of upheaval in public history. These are sequences strewn with loss – “an uninterrupted process of changes” that separates the past from the lived present of the reader. Change, rather than continuity, was foremost in Scott’s diachronic historical vision. Unlike his antiquarian fascination with the *genius loci*, Scott’s diachronic historicism developed a sense of time as urgent and fleeting. This impulse might be productively understood as an investment in *Kairos* – the Greek word for the “right time,” the time that demands decisive action. Unlike the layered strata of the antiquarian, which in its accumulation of details and fragments seemed to preserve whole worlds for future inspection, *Kairos* is time loaded with direction, which is to say, time charged with the possibility of death and loss. It is, in Maxwell’s estimation, an interest “not so much in any specific event as in the atmosphere of eventfulness, and thus of separation from tradition and the past, created by many great happenings occurring close together” (64). Where Scott’s synchronic historicism emphasized continuity with the present, Scott’s *Kairos* emphasized the process by which the past comes to be understood as past, as different or separate from the lived present.

Scott began publishing his historical fiction at a time when it was difficult to ignore the myriad ways the present was becoming separated from the past. The period witnessed an acute, perhaps even unprecedented, acceleration of social change. In Britain, industrialization was in full swing, populations were increasing faster than ever, and people were migrating in increasing numbers from country to city, where they encountered new social formations and were more likely to lose touch with old customs and religious practices. The years following the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars represent the “atmosphere of eventfulness” *par excellence*. Scott makes the case himself in the “Postscript, which should have been a Preface” to *Waverley*, remarking that

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12 Ibid., 65.
There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745,—the destruction of the patriarchal power of the Highland chiefs,—the abolition of the heritable jurisdictions of the Lowland nobility and barons,—the total eradication of the Jacobite party, which, averse to intermingle with the English, or adopt their customs, long continued to pride themselves upon maintaining ancient Scottish manners and customs,—commenced this innovation. The gradual influx of wealth and extension of commerce have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth’s time.13

Though Scott makes the case for the exceptional Scottish case, social acceleration was far from an exclusively Scottish phenomenon. As Peter Fritzsche writes, in the decades around the French Revolution there emerges across Europe a “perception of the restless iteration of the new so that the past no longer served as faithful guide to the future.”14 Reinhart Koselleck, the most thorough investigator of this phenomenon, writes that acceleration itself takes on a new experiential quality here: “Change, *mutation rerum*, can be reported in all histories. What is modern, however, is change that calls forth a new temporal experience: namely, that everything changes faster than could have been expected or had earlier been experienced. Through the shorter spaces of time, a component of unfamiliarity enters the everyday of those affected that cannot be derived from any previous experience.”15 Experience no longer acts as a guide to the present or future.

For Georg Lukács, this acceleration of change, and the attendant sense that past traditions could neither inform nor predict the future, was what made Scott’s historical fiction possible in the first place. The social and political changes that took place in the years between 1789 and 1814 rendered the historical character of life palpable, such that “the masses no longer have the impression of [historical change as] a ‘natural occurrence’” like an earthquake, but rather as a process with causes and effects that can be apprehended, even anticipated.16 This experience of change produces the “feeling first that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual.” Fritzsche extends this point, arguing that it was in these years that “history became a mass medium,” such that “contemporaries felt themselves as contemporaries, as occupants of a common time zone with mutually recognizable personalities, dramas, and processes such as ‘revolution’ or ‘industrialization.’”17 The individual encounters historical change as something at once shared and personal, something one participates in, willingly or not. Mass conscription begins in France in the wake of the Revolution, after the rest of Europe declares war on the new Republic. Conscription is then exported to the rest of Europe as nations struggled to muster armies to resist Napoleon’s imperial expansion. This is what makes history sensible as a “mass medium.” Whereas soldiers had previously come mainly from the lowest classes, the massive scale of Napoleon’s military campaigns required a seemingly constant stream of able-bodied

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14 *Stranded in the Present*, 5.
16 *The Historical Novel*, 23.
17 *Stranded in the Present*, 9-10.
men, who now came from all ranks. Mass conscription meant that classes of husbands, fathers, and brothers who would have previously been isolated from military action were now fighting, often far from home. Once confined to the lowest and highest orders of society (mercenaries and noblemen), war was now a bourgeois family concern. As Lukács writes, “the inner life of a nation is linked with the modern mass army in a way it could not have been with the absolutist armies of the earlier period” (24).

As the lives of more and more people were shaped by what once seemed like remote political antagonisms and military skirmishes, the need to make sense of these drastic changes grew more urgent. In this context, the key to Scott’s aesthetic innovation was his construction of a form that could capture the relation between changing social relations and the lives of individual subjects. By reflecting the individual’s relation to reality (which is to say, to the political, religious, and above all economic conditions responsible for the character of a given historical moment), Scott’s historical fiction was able to give form to the individual’s experience of history. If the Revolution and its aftermath produced, for the first time in Europe, a mass experience of history, the historical novel quickly emerged as the most effective means of reflecting this experience back to them. And it was the experience of history as Kairos, as decisive change severing past from present, that needed to be understood.

But by 1859, when Dickens takes up the Revolution, the Victorian realist novel had largely subordinated Scott’s representation of history as Kairos to what we might as well term Chronos – the more abstract sense of clock-time in which the antiquarian imagination flourishes. Realism shied away from Kairos, and with it, from the sense of historical moments as the products of prior struggles or the causes of future ones. The separation of Chronos and Kairos in Victorian realism was not absolute, of course, and the reverberations of historical

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18 On the mass experience of “total war” that takes hold in the wake of the French Revolution, see David A. Bell’s The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2007). On the affective experience of wartime, and the way in which war became “the very ground of thinking” in this period, see Mary Favret War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), 12.

19 Fittingly, both Lukács and Fritzsche’s analyses of these changes deploy the rhetoric of Kairos to make this case. Noting that in the eighteenth-century wars had mostly been waged by small professional armies, isolated from civilian populations, Lukács declares that “This changes at one stroke with the French Revolution” (The Historical Novel, 23). The Revolution represents a decisive change – at a single stroke, a new world is born. Likewise, Fritzsche concedes that his argument about the sudden emergence of the past as past “with its stress on the ‘moment of innovation’ and its dramatization of the years 1789-1815, reproduces, even if critically, the concept of modernity which is that history is the relentless iteration of the new” (Stranded in the Present, 8).

20 As mentioned above, Maxwell sees Scott’s historicism in terms of a synchronic/diachronic binary. He associates the former with Scott’s attention to physical space, and the latter with Scott’s representation of time in both the dramatic, eventful aspect I identify as Kairos, and the abstract sense of Chronos – what Benedict Anderson (following Walter Benjamin) refers to as “homogenous, empty time.” Conflating these two forms of time allows Maxwell to highlight the comparative strain in Scott’s crisis-oriented historical gaze, which Maxwell sees as indebted to the modern notion of simultaneity that Anderson identifies as the basis of burgeoning national consciousness. (Anderson: “one could argue that every essential modern conception is based on a conception of ‘meanwhile.’”)) For Anderson, the homogenous, empty time of modernity is the precondition of a sense of calendrical simultaneity that grants individuals the capacity to imagine themselves connected to people and communities on the other side of the nation (or globe). This notion of time makes it possible for them to see themselves as members of the same social organism moving through history. But Unlike Maxwell, I want to insist upon the necessity of a distinction, within the temporal poetics of Scott’s historicism, between meaningful, directed, crisis-time (Kairos), and empty, homogenous time (Chronos). Put simply, I am substituting Chronos v Kairos for Maxwell’s space v time. See Maxwell, Historical Novel, 64-5, and Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 2006), 24-26.
conflicts are certainly felt more distinctly in some instances (Gaskell’s industrial novels, Disraeli’s Young England trilogy, much of Eliot’s work, etc.) than in others. But by and large, what had in Scott’s fiction been interdependent – a sense of history felt both “deep and wide,” in Maxwell’s phrase, or a combination of “a nostalgic with a crisis-oriented sensibility,” which the past is made accessible through both digressive antiquarianism and dramatic depictions of the cataclysmic events that separate it from us – became decoupled by the mid-nineteenth-century. By 1859, the historical novel in its “classical form” (to borrow Lukács’s formulation) had been digested by the history of the novel itself, and its defining dialectic broken across two separate domains.

As a result, the axis along which the novel intersected with the real, lived present of the reader shifted. Historical settings factored as containers in which the lives of characters played out, and the crises that punctuated those lives no longer seemed to act upon the coordinates of the world itself. The world no longer seemed open to reconfiguration, because the narrative logic of realism circumvented the sense of historical crisis that Koselleck etymologizes: “Derived from κρίνω, to cut, to select, to decide, to judge; by extension, to measure, to quarrel, to fight – ‘crisis’ aimed at a definitive, irrevocable decision. The concept implied strict alternatives that permitted no further revision: success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, and finally, salvation or damnation.” Scott’s fiction derived much of its electricity from a sense of crisis in precisely this sense. Scott brings us into contact with the prospect of emergency, with historical moments freighted with historico-political significance: “Under which King, Bezonian? Speak, or die!”

While the struggle between social orders certainly remains important to novels of the mid-century, the narrative circuits of the great realist novels of the 1840s and 50s dedicate attention to the everyday at the expense of the world-historical. Daily life becomes the legitimate medium of history. If world-historical systems and events continue to factor in this strain of fiction, such movements take place at the margins, and sometimes outside the scope of the narrative. The autobiographical framing of novels like Jane Eyre or David Copperfield is representative of the realist novel’s fascination with the individual’s orbit as a potentially coherent (if embattled) sphere – a zone that may register larger collective historical processes, but which is nonetheless distinct from the upheavals occurring beyond its periphery. Historical change in its more public sense becomes visible when it impacts the course of the subject’s life, but the influence tends to works one way – history changes individuals, not the other way around. Thus, in Jane Eyre, the violence of the British empire’s colonial reach is concretized in the figure of Bertha Mason, who represents a challenge to Jane’s marriage plot. But the novel’s narrative does not compass changes to the colonial economy, and the eventual resolution of the marriage plot does not depend on any political or economic challenge to British rule in the West Indies. Rather, resolution is effected by Bertha Mason’s death and Rochester’s moral recuperation. And when grand public history does feature more prominently – as, for example, in the battle of Waterloo in Vanity Fair – it is primarily as a force of disruption, something that

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22 This is the state of affairs Fredric Jameson reassesses in The Antinomies of Realism: the tension between realism’s narrative and affective impulses, its reliance on a tripartite temporality to tell a story crossed with its desire to produce a sense of the lived present lacking directed or teleological coherence. (New York: Verso, 2013).
24 Scott uses this line, from Shakespeare’s Henry IV part II, as the epigraph to Waverley.
intercedes and wreaks havoc, but is otherwise unintelligible. George Osborne dies at Waterloo, leaving his pregnant wife Amelia at the mercy of George Sr.’s cruel charity. But the British victory is otherwise irrelevant to her fate. That Napoleon loses is less important, for the novel, than the fact that George dies. It is in this sense that, for the realist novel, history really is what hurts. Its menace grows visceral to the extent that it figures as something unassimilable, something exerting effects beyond anyone’s control.

But in A Tale, history looks very different. Here, history is emphatically not the everyday. The rhythms of daily life are not entirely overlooked, but they tend to attract notice only insofar as they portend the sublime energies about to be unleashed. The first glimpse of Paris is a case in point. When a wine cask bursts outside the Defarge’s shop in Saint Antoine, a crowd materializes to drink it. The ensuing description figures the desperate conditions of the populace in the ground, the material itself, as “the rough, irregular stones of the street, pointing every way, and designed, one might have thought, expressly to lame all living creatures that approached them, had dammed [the spilt wine] into little pools; these were surrounded, each by its own jostling group or crowd, according to its size” (31). The stones appear “designed” to injure those who pass over them, and their haphazard arrangement funnels the spilt wine into pools. Like the wine pooled amongst the sharp facets of the stony street, the crowds who gather there will also be described as liquid and uncontrollable, once the Revolution begins. Dickens’s attention to the look and feel of a place—his scanty antiquarianism—serves only to animate the environment with the looming force of epoch-shaking events. The quotidian world is charged with the overbearing significance of the violence to come.

In this sense, A Tale would not seem to share the historical sensibility of the realist novels of the 40s and 50s, with their deep investment in the texture of the everyday. But at the same time, neither does A Tale represent a full-fledged “return to Scott.” To see what Dickens is doing it is helpful to think in terms of Chronos and Kairos. Dickens was fully aware of the dramatic effects of Scott’s historical fiction, and in A Tale he follows Scott in recognizing Kairos, or historical crisis, as the special domain of the genre. But much has changed in the interval, and what took the form of a dialectical interplay in Scott becomes pure antagonism in Dickens. Kairos dominates Chronos in A Tale. The narrator states as much when King Louis XVI is beheaded, giving birth to a “new Era” (282). “There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time. Though days and nights circled as regularly as when time was young, and the evening and the morning were the first day, other count of time there was none” (282-3). This is the destruction of Chronos by Kairos. Without Scott’s deep sense of the dialectical relation between the two, the everyday rhythms of Chronos can factor only as victims of the violent upheavals of public time.

Public time itself nearly falls away in the works I turn to in my final chapter: the boys’ adventure fiction that rises to popularity toward the end of the century. Adventure fiction takes up and repurposes the tradition of the historical novel by adapting its core project for a globalized world. Though the historical novel itself by no means disappears at the end of the century, the adventure novel does emerge as the more vivacious and influential heir to the lineage I trace from Scott forward, because the adventure novel better charts what we might call the new terrain of history. Transcending national borders and plunging into the global system

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Perry Anderson remarks that the historical novel has become “more widespread than it was even at the height of its classical period in the 19th century.” See “From Progress to Catastrophe,” *London Review of Books* Vol. 33, No. 15 (July 28, 2011).
that now structured the historical imagination, the adventure novel explicitly engages what came to be regarded as the material of history. (It is also the genre that provides much of the material Hollywood draws on when developing the cliffhanger into a fully-fledged cinematic genre, and thus consolidates our contemporary sense of what a cliffhanger conventionally is and does.)

Of course, adventure fiction was aimed at children, while historical fiction had, in Scott’s day, been regarded as a serious art-form for adults. But as adventure fiction grew in popularity towards the end of the century, the historical novel itself was becoming a children’s genre. And just as Scott was being relegated to the school-room, children’s writers like G. A. Henty were making him seem like a natural fit there by pumping out historical adventures featuring adolescent heroes caught up in historical crises. Indeed, towards the end of the century, Scott’s influence in the literary sphere is clearest for this new brand of historical adventure fiction – a kind of instructive reading matter for children that was valued precisely because it could both educate and entertain.

But how could the adventure novel – on its face so little interested in the machinery of history or the minutiae of political and economic change – how could adventure be said to take up the imaginative legacy of Scott’s historical novel? How could pirates, deserted islands, and lost or buried treasures possibly provide anything like a coherent vision of the relation between public and private histories, or a means of grasping the individual life in relation to the larger structuring forces of social relations? If anything, adventure fiction would seem concerned with escaping history – fleeing the tedium of modern life by way of accidental or impulsive movements outwards, beyond the margins of empire. If the historical novel as a genre is invested in providing some vision of historical progress or change, how could the adventure novel’s flight away from contemporary issues like industrialization and political reform be grasped as anything like a continuation of that earlier project?

I argue that it is precisely through this outward movement that adventure fiction figures the historical imaginary of the later-nineteenth century. The urge to slip the borders of the nation takes the global system of travel as its point of departure. In doing so, the escapism of adventure fiction sustains the imaginative project of the historical novel, for in the “Age of Empire,” it is precisely this sense of global interdependence that serves as the ground for historical understanding. And alongside this geographical expansion outwards, narrative perspective is now more concertedly restricted to the individual than we have seen thus far. Where for both Scott and Dickens, the movements of principle characters were supplemented or framed by the totalizing, comparative perspective of an omniscient narrator, in the adventure novel, narration is usually ceded to the protagonist himself. And these personal accounts are purposefully slanted, or partial. Allan Quartermain, Ralph Rover, Jim Hawkins, David Balfour – these are all first-person, retrospective, homodiegetic narrators, telling their own stories in their own voices. Repurposing the mixed-document conventions of sensation fiction and foregrounding the situated perspective of the character-narrator, the adventure novel thus promises a direct experience of the expanding British empire and the contracting world-system. Physical immediacy is key here, for adventure fiction consistently takes the body of the protagonist/narrator himself as the ideal site to register the presence of the world-system, plunging him into stormy seas and washing him up on remote island beaches. And as we will see, the cliffhanger is central to achieving this effect, for the cliffhanger reproduces the surprise

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and confusion – the “foreignness” – of adventure in the jagged edges of the narrative discourse itself.

The gravitation towards the immediacy of the narrator’s physical perspective, and the concerted turn outwards, towards more distant locales, go hand in hand, as though the limited perspective of the narrator provides the ideal conditions to register the thrill of discovering social and cultural difference. The appeal of discovery is a legacy of the historical novel’s own anthropological investment in the customs and traditions of particular places. It is the impulse I aligned with the historical temporality of Chronos earlier. But whereas in the historical novel the anthropological drive was thoroughly historical, repeatedly highlighting the development of different manners of collective life, whether organized around religious, vocational, political, or regional identities, in the adventure novel, these sorts of differences are naturalized as effects of biology, and thus lose their temporal depth. They become flattened into expressions of racial difference.

This heightened attention to race reflects a new notion of historical change that fully emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the adventure novel can be understood as a transformation of the historical novel to incorporate and analyze this new ideology of history. In terms of broad formal tendencies, in Scott, the protagonist’s movement away from the metropole brought polite bourgeois characters and readers alike into contact with earlier stages of the modern nation’s social and economic development. The historical novel functioned, in this sense, like a time machine. By plunging readers and characters into the rural periphery of the nation – the geographical terrain where outmoded ways of life had not yet been marked as vestigial or irrelevant – Scott’s fiction made it possible to visit prior historical eras and witness the process of their transformation into more recognizably modern ones. In adventure fiction, the movement outwards towards the imperial periphery retains this function as a leap backwards in time, but the sign of historical rewind now becomes the encounter with black and brown bodies and cultures. Stadal history and notions of uneven development are recast as effects of longer racial histories, in which genetics, rather than economics, factor most significantly.

This shift is clearest in the thorough transmutation of historical otherness from a temporal to a spatial axis. Adventure fiction is by and large set in the reader’s present. Thus, if the adventurer inevitably encounters antecedent historical communities, the sense of anachronistic wonder – of time travel – that we might expect to arise from such encounters is dampened when the historical remoteness of those communities is attributed to spatial distance and racial otherness. Or to put it another way, because adventure protagonists travel out into the world, far from home, the signs of historical difference they encounter are marked as evidence of otherness, with little proximate developmental or genealogical relation to the European protagonists. And where there is evidence of such a genealogical relation, it is at the evolutionary scale of the species – a relation spanning millennia, rather than the several generations (sixty years since) of the historical novel. The relevant past is now prehistoric.29 In adventure, encounters with historical difference thus do little to illuminate the home or the present day of the protagonist and his audience. The lost worlds of adventure fiction, located at the margins of empire, are sealed off from the real of the present. (Robert Louis Stevenson’s fiction represents an important exception.) In de-temporalizing and spatializing historical difference, the adventure novel thus renders it inert.

29 Arthur Conan Doyle literalizes this in The Lost World, sending Dr. Challenger to discover dinosaurs on an isolated plateau in South America.
A PAUSE IN THE ACTION

In broad strokes, then, these are the developments in the novel’s representation of history that I will be tracing over the next three chapters, as the cliffhanger becomes vital to its project. But to grasp how the cliffhanger emerged as such an appropriate formal crystallization of the novel’s historical aims, it will first be necessary to break down its own operation. With a better understanding of the cliffhanger’s forms and functions, its appeal to historical novelists will become clearer.

Let us return, then, to the phrase Emily Nussbaum used to describe the cliffhanger – the “climax cracked in half.” Nussbaum is absolutely right that the cliffhanger is an event cracked in half, because the cliffhanger is in essence a particular configuration of story and discourse, a configuration that is best understood as a misalignment. Now, in a strict sense story and discourse are always misaligned, insofar as they cannot be identical. Narrative discourse cannot fully correspond to story, because in showing or telling some things, narrative discourse necessarily produces a world about which we may infer things that remain untold or unseen. As Seymour Chatman puts it, “story…exists only at an abstract level; any manifestation already entails the selection and arrangement performed by the discourse as actualized by a given medium. There is no privileged manifestation” (37). Nonetheless, misalignment suits my purposes here, as the following remarks will show.

When we encounter a cliffhanger, we find a unit of discourse (like a chapter, or an installment of a serial) concluding before an episode in the story has reached resolution. The cliffhanger is first and foremost a place where the narrative discourse stops too soon, before the event or episode being narrated is resolved. And unlike narrative discourse in general, the misalignment effected by the cliffhanger is experienced as an intentional failure in telling. In order for a discursive stop to be a cliffhanger, we must recognize the discourse’s refusal to narrate as a feature of the design.

This distinguishes the cliffhanger’s unique brand of misalignment from the fundamental asymmetry between story and discourse described by Chatman. Following Chatman, for example, we may wonder whether Ishmael, arriving at the Spouter-Inn in chapter 3 of Moby-Dick, opens the door before entering. Ishmael begins chapter 3 by “entering that gable-ended Spouter-Inn…” but he does not say whether he finds the door open or closed, whether he knocks before entering, or whether the door is opened for him by someone else.30 But the fact that Ishmael does not tell us any of this does not impede our understanding of what he does narrate, which is that he enters. One might argue that story and discourse are “misaligned” here, insofar as we may infer things about the story that are not stated in the discourse.

By contrast, a cliffhanger is a discursive pause positioned such that the narration of a particular event is obstructed, and this obstruction is understood as intentional. Unlike an accidental, external pause in the discourse (like the power going out while watching television, or a fire in a movie theater forcing you to leave suddenly), the cliffhanger is orchestrated by an implied author, and therefore bears on our impression of the overall narrative design. In other words, cliffhangers are intentional, meaningful storytelling acts that bear on the stories they interrupt.

Cliffhangers are acts of deliberate disruption – moments where the text intentionally breaks off in what feels like the wrong place. We might therefore class the cliffhanger with Peter J. Rabinowitz’s “rules of configuration.” In his discussion of how narratives generally call attention to some features over others, Rabinowitz points out that, because “we tend to skim over the even and the unbroken,” “disruptions attract our notice” (65). Because cliffhangers disrupt the text itself, they cannot help but attract notice. And for Rabinowitz, the sorts of disruptions that attract notice are also predictive, making it possible for us to anticipate what happens later on (111). This is precisely what the cliffhanger invites us to do. When a cliffhanger interrupts a developing situation, we anticipate how that situation will resolve because the text refuses to do it for us. Our sense of the story’s incompleteness at that moment renders the discursive stop frustrating, even cruel. A narrative stopped at random does not produce the same frustration. Annoyance perhaps, but not the focused discomfort of the cliffhanger. The wrongness of the cliffhanger ending must be well-timed, such that it holds open the promise of a revelatory relationship between the partially narrated moment and the larger shape of the story. Such a relationship compels the reader to speculate specifically on how the resolution of the interrupted event relates to the narrative as a whole, and thus the interrupted moment assumes greater importance with respect to the narrative flow that produces it. Irresolution asserts relevance, and the capacity to magnify a given moment accounts for the cliffhanger’s urgency, as well as its propensity to frustrate some readers and annoy others. In this regard, the cliffhanger fully conforms to a more general point that Rabinowitz makes concerning rules of configuration: “a rule of configuration can be just as important to the reading experience when the outcomes it predicts turn out not to take place as when they do” (111). Cliffhangers always appear to mark the events they interrupt as significant with respect to the unfolding story, so in cases where such events end up not, in fact, mattering, the reader will feel manipulated. The cliffhanger always seems to promise a relevant payoff, but it may not always deliver it.

In other words, regardless of whether a cliffhanger marks a crisis or not, they are elements of authorial design that function as signals for interpretation. Authors use cliffhangers to frame particular moments and invigorate certain tensions, or more mischievously, to create impressions that outright mislead the reader. One of the cliffhanger’s most intriguing functions is its capacity to grant unwarranted urgency to a scene, leading the reader to expect developments that do not actually come to pass in the story. But whether a cliffhanger misleads or not, it makes claims about the narrative that shape the way readers experience the unfolding story.

I stress the procedural or progressive nature of the cliffhanger, because it is important to think of it as a dynamic formal configuration – something that unfolds over time, much like plot itself. And for this reason, it will be helpful to borrow from the rhetorical theory of narrative to flesh out the cliffhanger’s different forms. For rhetorical narrative theorists, all narratives contain what James Phelan calls a “progression”: a series of events that unfolds in both its telling and its reception. As Phelan puts it, the analysis of narrative progression is “concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers’ interests in narrative,” and the premise of such analysis is that “all parts of a narrative may have consequences for the progression, even if those consequences lie solely in their effect on the reader’s understanding of the instabilities, tensions, and resolution.” Insofar as we may think of the cliffhanger as a means by which narratives plot

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32 Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.
their own reception – guiding audience attention and emphasizing dynamics that are not always transparent in the story itself – the rhetorical approach is well-suited to the analysis of the cliffhanger.

At the same time, applying the rhetorical approach to the cliffhanger draws attention to an aspect of narrative that Phelan has less interest in: the generative potential of “bad” design. In his recent work, Phelan emphasizes the importance of judgments (interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic) to the reception of narrative, writing:

A story that puts the protagonist in peril and then ends with the sudden and unprepared-for revelation that the protagonist has been dreaming is ethically and aesthetically flawed. Such a story is ethically flawed because its implied author asks the audience to invest themselves in the protagonist’s actions while knowing all along that those actions are merely illusions even within the world of the fiction. Such a story is aesthetically flawed because the sudden revelation requires the audience radically to reconfigure their understanding of the story for no benefit other than the surprise itself. In short, such a story is built on the aesthetics of the cheap trick.33

Though Phelan’s example here is not actually a cliffhanger, one could easily imagine a cliffhanger working like this – framing a scene to produce the impression of peril and then quickly resolving it in the next chapter. The “bait-and-switch” technique Phelan describes is extreme, but it bears a family resemblance to instances of cliffhangers that I will discuss below. Though such cliffhangers are certainly misleading, I argue that we would nonetheless do well to understand how and why they are misleading, and what effects they can have for narratives. For Phelan, such cheap tricks are flaws indicative of bad narrative design. While I agree with this judgment in many cases, I believe there is some middle ground here, and that such “flaws” can be recuperated as important aspects of effective narrative designs. Even when narratives mislead their readers, the nature of that misdirection is itself instructive, even central to the reader’s configuration of the narrative progression.

MISALIGNMENT

It may help to work with some examples. In Thomas Hardy’s A Pair of Blue Eyes, Henry Knight and Elfride Swancourt are walking along the Western coast of England atop the “Cliff with No Name.” Intrigued by the behavior of air currents there, Knight veers towards the cliff, when a gust of wind knocks his hat off. Pursuing it, Knight slips on the wet grass and is only able to avoid falling by catching a tuft of vegetation – “the last outlying knot of starved herbage ere the rock appeared in all its bareness.”34 Suspended over the cliff, Knight wagers he can hold on for ten minutes – not nearly long enough for Elfride to run for help. Knight and Elfride stare at one another for a minute when “on a sudden the blank and helpless agony left her face. She vanished over the bank from his sight,” and “Knight felt himself in the presence of a

33 Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 95.
34 A Pair of Blue Eyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 197.
personalized loneliness” (198). With that, the chapter ends. The cliffhanger applies a discursive constraint to narrative ends by pairing a moment of irresolution in the story with a stopping point in the discourse. The effect is essentially a protest from the reader: this isn’t over yet. What will happen to Knight? Where has Elfride gone? Will she return? The narrative scene is not finished, despite the chapter coming to an end.

Conventions that organize narrative events (such as the chapter, the television episode, the book or canto, etc) usually synchronize discursive closure with some measure of resolution in the story: conversations end, characters retire, actions and events are completed. This convention is useful because it helps to coordinate the necessarily stop-and-go rhythm of consuming a long text with the gradual development of the story’s progression. Pairing episodic resolution in the story with breaks in the discursive organization makes the chapter break a convenient time to stop reading, because it creates the impression that the story itself has reached a natural pause. The novelistic chapter “aerat[e[s] the reading experience by providing internal breaks that allow us to put the book down” writes Nicholas Dames. “The subject was pursued no further, and the gentlemen soon afterwards went away,” remarks the narrator of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice as one chapter comes to an end. Endings like this harmonize the progression of events in the story with the discursive pieces that represent that progression. The conversation has ended and the characters have gone their separate ways, so the reader may put the book down and reflect on the relation between this part of the story, just concluded, and the developing whole, which remains open. The opportunity to pause in reading is nicely synchronized with a pause in the development of the story. “It’s ok to stop reading, because nothing is happening right now,” the discursive organization seems to suggest. “Being assured of the text’s complicity in our bit-by-bit reading,” as Dames puts it, “allows us to interweave our lives with our reading more thoroughly” (857).

Cliffhangers, on the other hand, are puckish; they disrupt the sense of synchrony between story and discourse by ejecting us from the discourse with the story in full swing: Knight is literally hanging from a cliff! Rather than synchronizing the rhythm of discourse with the rhythm of story, the cliffhanger instead flaunts the distinction between the two. Discourse does not have to line up neatly with the contours of the events it represents. As a result, the pause in the discourse (i.e. in reading), is at odds with the development of the story, because the events being represented have not found resolution yet. We may be able to anticipate what happens next, but the foreshortened discourse refuses to confirm the issue of the scene at hand.

The scene unresolved, the cliffhanger leaves us in a state of tension concerning what happens in the story at a precise moment. This orientation towards the present is central to my understanding of the cliffhanger, because it distinguishes the cliffhanger’s temporal configuration from other varieties of suspense. Think, for example, of the sorts of episode-ending revelations common to soap operas, or the revelation of Esther Summerson’s blindness at the end of Bleak House chapter 31. These are dramatic flourishes that alter our understanding of the narrative trajectory, either by reconfiguring our expectations about what will follow (in the case of Bleak House), or our understanding of what has come before (as when we learn that two

35 This was the conclusion of the novel’s 6th monthly part in the February 1873 issue of Tinsley’s Magazine.
36 For some media (films and plays, for example), consumption lacks this implicitly serial aspect, but such media nonetheless have conventions for marking points of episodic completeness in the discourse (on stage a curtain or lights-out generally separates acts, on screen there are cuts, dissolves, intertitles, etc).
37 “Trollope’s Chapters” Literature Compass 7.9 (2010) 857.
characters have been romantically involved all along on a soap opera). Still, to my mind these do not constitute cliffhangers, because the scenes in which the revelations occur are complete. Suspenseful or surprising as such revelations may be, we are not left in any doubt concerning what is happening in the scene at hand: the revelation is made, the conversation is over.

The cliffhanger is always produced by a misalignment of story and discourse, but not all misalignments of this sort produce cliffhangers. The misalignment of the cliffhanger must bear on the story at two scales: the scene at hand, and the plot as a larger totality. The action of the interrupted scene must be unresolved, and appear significant for the larger arc of the narrative, or the interruption will lack the sort of urgency that defines the cliffhanger. This is why not just any interruption will do. Take, for example, the following scene from Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Dick Swiveller has struck up a friendship with a kitchen maid he affectionately names “the Marchioness.” As the chapter draws to a close, Dick and the Marchioness begin a game of cards:

The Marchioness, holding her cards very tight in both hands, considered which to play, and Mr Swiveller, assuming the gay and fashionable air which such society required, took another pull at the tankard, and waited for her lead.

Chapter 58

Mr Swiveller and his partner played several rubbers with varying success, until the loss of three sixpences, the gradual sinking of the purl, and the striking of ten o’clock, combined to render that gentleman mindful of the flight of Time...

The break falls on an unresolved action (the marchioness playing her card), and yet the misalignment of chapter and scene does not feel urgent. This is not a cliffhanger because the interrupted action does not appear relevant to the trajectory of the unfolding story. When the Marchioness plays her card, she demonstrates friendly communion with Dick, but this newfound friendship is not a result of the action itself. The game reflects, rather than enacts, their new social relationship, and the interrupted action thus promises no significant changes to either the scene itself or the plot as a whole. Cliffhangers can only emerge in the midst of actions that appear to bear a consequential relationship to the narrative whole.

In other words, cliffhangers signal narrative change, because they suggest that the interrupted action bears a productive relationship to the unfolding plot. This allows us to specify the temporal function of the device: not only does the cliffhanger focus attention on the immediate present, it also calibrates this present with the discernible trajectory of the plot. The discursive pause frames a perspective on the story from which certain actions appear significant because they are unresolved. If the interrupted action does not appear to influence the story’s trajectory, then the discursive break will not have the same effect, which is why not all narrative misalignments function as cliffhangers.

James Phelan’s concepts of narrative tension and instability help to clarify this, by offering a way to distinguish between cliffhangers and other forms of narrative misalignment. For Phelan, tensions are conflicts of “value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation...between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other,” whereas instabilities are conflicts within the story: “between characters, created by situations, and

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40 Chapter 57 concluded the novel’s 36th weekly installment, and chapter 58 began the 37th. *The Old Curiosity Shop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 431.
complicated and resolved through actions.” As visible gaps in the discourse, cliffhangers always truck in tensions, because they leave what is sayable unsaid. Insofar as narratable resolution is always left un-narrated via the misalignment of story and discourse, the cliffhanger produces tension between what the author and the audience respectively know.

Yet not all tensions arising from story/discourse misalignments generate cliffhangers. In the novels of Walter Scott, for example, chapters occasionally close mid-conversation, with the narrator issuing statements like “here the conversation paused, until renewed in the next chapter,” or “the answer…we must defer to our next chapter.” These winking comments give voice to a mild tension by ironically acknowledging the arbitrary relationship between story time and book form: the narrator may take as many chapters as he chooses to represent a conversation. But the stakes are lower, and they come off not so much as cliffhangers, as teasing invitations to turn the page.

In order for the tension of misalignment to function as a cliffhanger, it must be coordinated with what Phelan calls an instability: a conflict or problem within the story. Phelan distinguishes between “local” and “global” instabilities, noting that the former are those “whose resolution does not signal the completeness of the progression,” whereas global instabilities “are those that provide the main track of the progression and must be resolved for a narrative to attain completeness.” In the example from The Old Curiosity Shop cited above, there is very little instability, either local or global. As a result, the authorial audience is not invited to consider the resolution of either the tension (in which the narrator would divulge which card the Marchioness plays), or the instability (in which she would either win the hand or lose it), as instrumental in the larger progression.

Two other terms drawn from Phelan’s work on narrative progression are helpful here: completeness and closure. “Completeness” refers to the degree to which the instabilities and tensions that make up the narrative are resolved by the end of a narrative, whereas closure is not concerned with resolution, but with the way a narrative signals its end (“at the end of the day…” or “Final Act”). Cliffhangers are points of episodic closure that remain incomplete.

To refine our initial definition in more explicitly rhetorical terms, we might say that cliffhangers occur when a particular kind of discursive tension (the misalignment of story and discourse) is produced in the midst of a local instability when this instability appears relevant to the global instability of the narrative progression. I emphasize appearance here, because as I will explore further below, the cliffhanger itself never guarantees that the instability it points to is relevant. When this happens, the tension gives the closure – the discursive pause – an incomplete quality that bears on the story as a whole. The premature stop creates an unknown that purports to reveal something about the story it interrupts. Hence the lure to find out what happens, to confirm apprehensions, to read on.

41 Reading People, Reading Plots, 15.
43 Comments like these are minor variations of the splendid digression at the beginning of Waverley volume two, in which the narrator considers, “shall this be a long or a short chapter? – This is a question in which you, gentle reader, have no vote, however much you may be interested in the consequences.” See Walter Scott, Waverley, 115.
44 Experiencing Fiction, 16.
CONTINUITY AND CONSISTENCY

With a definition of the cliffhanger in hand, we can now begin to differentiate between the device’s different forms and functions. Cliffhangers are not all alike, nor do they all do the same thing. It is important to distinguish cliffhangers along two chief axes: continuity and consistency. Cliffhangers can be continuous or discontinuous, depending on whether the break splits a continuous scene or acts as a point of transition between different scenes. They can also be consistent or inconsistent, depending on whether the relevance of the instability framed at the break is sustained or not. I call these “axes” of distinction because cliffhangers may fall on any point along the continuum. I will take up continuity first, then consistency.

Consider the following moment in book XVII of the Iliad. Patróklos has been killed, and the Trojans, led by Hektor, pursue the body as it is borne off by Meneláos and Meríonês. The book comes to a halt in the midst of this pursuit:

As a cloud of starlings
Or jackdaws shrieking bloody murder flies
On seeing a hawk about to strike; he brings
A slaughter on small wingèd things; just so
Under pursuit by Hektor and Aineías
Akhaian soldiers shrieked and fled, their joy
In combat all forgotten. Routed Akhaians’
Gear of war piled up along the moat,
And there was never a respite from the battle.45

Though the action of battle is unending (“there was never a respite”), the book stops here. Why conclude the section with an ongoing action? Why not bring the battle to an end?46 This is the question we must always ask the cliffhanger: why stop here? What is gained by stopping here, instead of somewhere else?

In this case, the break becomes an opportunity to pivot from one place to another, as book eighteen begins “While they were still in combat, fighting seaward / raggedly as fire, Antílokhos / ran far ahead with tidings for Akhilleus” (XVIII. 1-3). The poet uses the break to shift scenes, rejoining Antílokhos on his search for Akhilleus. This is a discontinuous cliffhanger, because when the discourse resumes, it pivots away from the incomplete scene and picks up elsewhere. There is a relation between the two scenes, because Akhilleus’s absence from the battle produces the stalemate between Trojans and Akhaians underlined by the cliffhanger. Akhilleus’ reappearance will drive the Trojans off, as he himself promises when he declares “they’ll know then / how long they had been spared the deaths of men, / while I abstained from war!” (XVIII. 143-5). The break sustains the instability posited at the end of book seventeen and juxtaposes it with a branch of action that is related but developing elsewhere. The cliffhanger thus helps to

46 The Homeric example is delicate because the Homeric epics were of course oral performances, not written texts. The distinction is important, and we should be cautious about attributing too much significance to the organization of the poem’s books. Nonetheless, as Bruce Heiden argues, not only is this the only form in which we have the Homeric epics, there is also evidence that the grouping of events commonly referred to as “books” actually has a deeper structure inherited from oral performance. See Heiden, “The Placement of ‘Book Divisions’ in the Iliad, The Journal of Hellenic Studies 118 (1998): 68-81.
draw out a causal relation between the disparate actions, forging a unified narrative line out of events occurring across diegetic space.\footnote{In related terms, Frank Brandsma points to the innovative use of narrative interlace and suspended episodes in the thirteenth century text \textit{Lancelot en prose}. In Brandsma’s account, suspended narrative lines are summarized via character dialogue in order to emphasize narrative convergence and simultaneity across a vast diegetic world that includes the wanderings of many different knights. Brandsma notes that this narrative technique probably mediated some of the challenges felt by the contemporary audience in retaining a long narrative, since this audience was probably listening to the text read aloud. See Brandsma, ‘Et La Roine... S'en Sourist’: Dramatic Irony and the Narrative Technique of Interlace,” \textit{Neophilologus} 73.3 (1989): 339-49.}

We find a similar type of discontinuity in Book IX of \textit{Paradise Lost}, when, having tasted the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve argue over who is truly to blame for their fateful transgression. After witnessing them exchange recriminations for many lines, the narrator intrudes with “thus they in mutual accusation spent / the fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning, / And of their vain contést appeared no end.”\footnote{\textit{Paradise Lost} (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 1975), IX. 1187-1189.} We read that the argument between Adam and Eve does not cease, precisely when the representation of that argument does. This ironically validates the concluding assertion that “of their vain contést \textit{appeared} no end,” because, indeed, for the reader, the argument does not appear to end. Instead, Milton substitutes a discursive stop that has the paradoxical effect of imaginatively sustaining the “fruitless hours” precipitated by the forbidden fruit. The next book of the poem begins with a pivot:

\begin{quote}
Meanwhile the heinous and despiteful act
Of Satan done in Paradise, and how
He in the serpent had perverted Eve,
Her husband she, to taste the fatal fruit,
Was known in heav’n; for what can scape the eye
Of God all-seeing… (X. 1-6)
\end{quote}

As in \textit{The Iliad}, the discursive break between books IX and X slices across diegetic space to identify a pertinent action occurring simultaneously in the narrative chronology. The result is that the narrative is able to elaborate events occurring synchronically, across the wide spatial plane of the narrative, while retaining the momentum of diachronic progression.

Something very different appears in the elaborate digressions of Ariosto’s \textit{Orlando Furioso}. Here too the poet draws attention to irresolution and interrupted activity at the end of cantos, but the motivation is different, and the result is a steady use of \textit{continuous}, rather than discontinuous cliffhangers. Here too the poet draws attention to irresolution and interrupted activity at the end of cantos, but the motivation is quite a bit different. At the end of Canto 2, for example, Pinabello tricks Bradamant into lowering herself into a chasm to rescue a damsel. Pinabello holds out a branch for Bradamant to hold, and

\begin{quote}
grasping it herself, she lowered her feet into the chasm and suspended herself from the branch. Pinabello smiled, and asked her how well she jumped; then he opened his hands, saying: ‘Would that all your lot were with you here – thus could I put an end to the whole tribe of you.’ /
\end{quote}

The innocent damsel’s fate, however, was not as Pinabello wished, for as she tumbled from rock to rock, not she but the good stout branch was the first to hit the
bottom. There it snapped but after affording her enough support to save her from death. She lay stunned awhile, as I shall go on to tell you in the next canto.\textsuperscript{49}

To modern sensibilities, this canto probably goes on a few lines too many. Were this a modern thriller, the discourse would break off after Pinabello’s taunt, leaving the reader in doubt as to how Bradamant could possibly survive. Still, this moment indicates a telling shift in the function of the discursive break, because here we find the poet drawing attention to the canto itself as a means of delaying narrative revelation. The promise of more information concerning the embattled heroine, coordinated with the discursive close, transforms a species of poetic form into a form of narrative obstruction. The break stands out, impeding our vision of the narrative trajectory.

A fantastic instance of this practice comes at the end of the tenth canto.\textsuperscript{50} After Ruggiero has rescued Angelica and carried her to the shores of Brittany,

He dismounted, but could scarcely restrain himself from climbing onto a different mount; but his gear delayed him: it delayed him, for he had to pull it off; it obstructed the impetus of his desire. / With hasty fingers he fumbled confusedly at his armour, now this side, now the other. Never before had it seemed such a long business – for every thong unlaced, two seemed to become entangled. But this canto has gone on too long, my Lord, and perhaps you are growing a-weigh with listening to it: I shall defer my story to another time when it may prove more welcome. (105-6)

Ruggiero’s struggle with the armor is reproduced at the level of poetic form, as the canto break obstructs our vision of what happens next. Paired with the poet’s direct readerly address (“my Lord…perhaps you are growing a-weigh”) the discursive misalignment implicates the reader, placing our desire to see what happens next in league with Ruggiero’s lust. But at the start of the eleventh canto, Angelica uses a magic ring to turn invisible and escape from Ruggiero, and the ease of this escape underlines the cliffhanger’s hand in producing the tension just a moment before. In the story, Angelica’s escape follows immediately upon Ruggiero’s struggle with his armor, but in the discourse this development is postponed. And this postponement grants the moment of struggle the appearance of true instability. This is not to say that Angelica is not in danger when Ruggiero sets himself upon her, but rather that the reader’s sense of this danger is significantly influenced by the delay produced by the cliffhanger.

Continuity and discontinuity only become apparent in retrospect, meaning that when the reader encounters the discursive break itself, discontinuous and continuous cliffhangers look exactly the same. Their functions, however, are different. Though both frame instabilities, the discontinuous cliffhanger has what we might call a longer reach than the continuous one.\textsuperscript{51} That

\textsuperscript{50}Thanks to Ian Duncan for bringing this moment to my attention.
\textsuperscript{51}This concept of the cliffhanger’s “reach” roughly corresponds to Gérard Genette’s use of the term in his discussion of analepses and prolepses, except that I am describing expanses in discourse time, not story time. For Genette, the “reach” of an anachrony is the temporal distance (in story time) between the matter narrated via the anachrony and the “present” moment of the story interrupted by the insertion of the anachrony. So, for example, in the Odyssey, the account of Odysseus’s scar is an anachrony with a long reach because it narrates events that took place many years prior to the present action. Here, I use reach to characterize the distance between the cliffhanger and its resolution in discourse time, because with the cliffhanger, the intervening material need not be anachronistic. Continuous cliffhangers, meanwhile, have no reach because following the discursive pause they pick up precisely
is, the instability articulated by the discontinuous cliffhanger extends further in discourse time, inclining us to read the intervening material with an eye towards its relevance to the unresolved instability. Thus, in our example from the Iliad, we do not learn how the battle between Trojans and Akhaians turns out until much later in the discourse, after following Antilokhos to Akhilleus, hearing of Akhilleus’s rage, of his shield, etc. In this regard, the discontinuous cliffhanger often works as what Meir Sternberg calls a “retardatory device” – a tactic for “creating, intensifying, or prolonging suspense” by impeding “the natural progression of action.” Of course, all cliffhangers delay action (even if only symbolically, via the blank space of the chapter ending), but discontinuous cliffhangers embrace this function more fully by introducing retardatory material – digressions, commentary, interpolated tales, flashbacks, etc – that may complicate, contextualize, or simply suspend the unresolved scene. By pivoting, discontinuous cliffhangers weave unresolved threads into the larger narrative tissue, rendering the whole fabric tense, coiled.

The continuous cliffhanger, on the other hand, frames an instability and then immediately resolves it in the subsequent section. Which begs the question: why interrupt an unfolding scene only to pick right back up where we left off? Why not just render the scene complete? I believe that the question produced by the irresolution is the cliffhanger’s real motivation. The cliffhanger imbues its chosen moment with significance by rendering it an open question for the reader. This is a way of turning narrative momentum against itself, marshaling the reader’s desire to know what happens next as a means of reflecting on what has happened before. Of course, the importance of delay to narrative is well known, whether as a conscious imperative, a strategic move in the implicit contract governing narrative exchange, or a technical inevitability. The cliffhanger simply literalizes this prerogative by employing the constraints of the medium itself to effect delay, making revelation contingent on continued reading. This is true of narrative in general, but cliffhangers are unique in the scale at which they operate, because they render the narrative present contingent on the discursive future. Cliffhangers hold their readers in suspense concerning what is happening right now, in the story.

And herein lies the device’s subversive potential: the cliffhanger has a striking capacity to mislead. This is most visible in what we might call inconsistent cliffhangers. When the affect generated by the discursive cut proves inconsistent with the continuation of the scene, the cliffhanger becomes what I consider “inconsistent.” The instability isolated at the end of a discursive unit is revealed as faulty – merely a product of the discursive cut itself, rather than an actual instability in the story. A case in point: towards the end of The Old Curiosity Shop, the beleaguered little Nell walks the streets of a busy town, seeking charity but finding none. When a traveler appears before her she is “animated with a ray of hope,” and moves to implore the man for help. “He turned his head. The child clapped her hands together, uttered a wild shriek, and fell senseless at his feet” (343). The chapter (and serial installment) ends here, but in the very first sentence of the next chapter we learn that the man is in fact an old friend. Nell has fallen senseless with the joy of recognition, not the threat of harm. In instances like this we must revise the impression created at the discursive cut. Push the chapter break forward to include one more sentence and the reader’s understanding of a single moment changes entirely.


53 This sentence concludes the 45th chapter and the 25th weekly installment of The Old Curiosity Shop in Master Humphry’s Clock.
The adventure films for which the term “cliffhanger” was coined provide extreme examples of this type of inconsistency. The cliffhanger’s revisionary function is boldest in the “cheat endings” of the popular chapter-plays of the 1930s. Chapter two of Republic’s Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island, for example, ends with the hero, Mala, held at spear-point over a pit of bubbling lava. In the last seconds of the chapter, a plank is pulled and we see Mala begin his plunge into the volcano, as his captors rush forward to witness his demise. The next installment begins by backtracking several scenes to reveal some friends exploring the mouth of the volcano where Mala is being held. Seeing Mala captured, the friends throw a flash-bomb to distract the natives, while lowering a rope to Mala. As the natives are thrown into confusion, we learn that Mala did not actually fall into the lava (as we witnessed in the last installment), but actually climbed to safety!

Cheat-endings represent the extreme of a cliffhanger’s propensity to manipulate the audience’s expectations, straining credibility past the breaking point. But such blatant inconsistencies are simply an intensified version of the disruptive force central to all cliffhangers. The inconsistency on display in Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island should be understood as a distilled instance of the cliffhanger’s core dynamic, not a perversion of its proper usage. Even when cliffhangers do not indulge in such revisionary bravado, the device always possesses the capacity to misrepresent the scene at hand, and this is a great part of why they are compelling. Inconsistent cliffhangers are akin to red herrings or false leads in this respect: they are devices that draw, without necessarily rewarding attention, encouraging the reader to form certain expectations, only to force reconfigurations of those expectations down the line. More consistent cliffhangers, like the examples drawn from the Iliad or A Pair of Blue Eyes above, develop instabilities more thoroughly, rewarding the reader’s investment in the crises framed at the discursive break. But because inconsistency (like discontinuity) is only revealed to the reader in retrospect, once we have resumed reading, there is no way to tell a consistent from an inconsistent cliffhanger as it happens. Though we are prone to think of cliffhangers as future-oriented (“and then? and then?”), their retrospective orientation is just as strong, for we must also look backwards to reassess the impressions formed at the point of misalignment.

Another way to understand this is to say that inconsistent cliffhangers sabotage what Peter J. Rabinowitz calls “the other shoe rule.” The other shoe rule is a principle of causality that the authorial audience may assume regarding antecedents and consequents: “when one shoe drops, you should expect the other” (133). In any narrative context, this rule helps account for why some outcomes are surprising and others are not, why some developments satisfy expectations and others do not. The other shoe rule encompasses some of the basic conditions of narratability, such as “it is generally appropriate to assume that events will produce results” (133). Inconsistent cliffhangers undermine the other shoe rule by inviting us to expect the other shoe, and then revealing that the first one never actually dropped. When Mala falls into the volcano, we do not expect to see him again, and yet we do. The event we witnessed turns out not to have produced any result; in fact, the event turns out not to have occurred at all. The more inconsistent the cliffhanger, the more it threatens to undermine the narrative progression.

As this example demonstrates, inconsistent cliffhangers can (and often do) come off as weaknesses in narrative design – moments where the author produces an artificial effect to secure temporary interest in a story that has little to offer in its own right. Phelan casts such faults in relief in his readings of Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever” and Ian McEwan’s Atonement

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54 Before Reading, 133-140.
two narratives that deploy surprises to great effect. I won’t rehearse Phelan’s readings here, but his conclusions about when and why surprise endings succeed are instructive. In “Roman Fever,” for example, Phelan focuses on how the story “deliberately seek[s] to move our configuration [the authorial audience’s hypothesis about the direction and purpose of the narrative] in one direction only to reveal to us…that a different direction and purpose has been guiding the progression all along” (19). In both of Phelan’s examples, a revelation towards the end of the narrative forces the reader to reconfigure her understanding of where the narrative has been going, and what it has been about all along. Phelan sees these narratives as successful because they provide “material in the progression that can retrospectively be understood as preparing the audience for the surprise,” even if this material is not recognized as such at the time (95). As a result, the eventual surprise deepens the audience’s emotional investments in characters. But in less successful cases, surprise forces the reader to “reconfigure their understanding of the story for no benefit other than the surprise itself” (95). Inconsistent cliffhangers like the one in Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island fall in to this camp: cheap tricks.

There is, however, a middle ground here. Inconsistent cliffhangers can mislead in productive ways, by suggesting relations or occurrences and then subsuming those suggestions into the thematic register of the narrative. Such cliffhangers are misleading insofar as they lead us to expect events and resolutions that do not come to pass, but they nonetheless inform what does happen. We find an excellent example of this early in Dickens’s Great Expectations. It’s Christmas dinner, and Mrs. Joe is about to serve the assembled company a pork pie in honor of the occasion. Unbeknownst to her, Pip has stolen that pie and delivered it to the escaped convict, Magwitch. Here’s what happens next:

My sister went out to get it. I heard her steps proceed to the pantry. I saw Mr. Pumblechook balance his knife. I saw reawakening appetite in the Roman nostrils of Mr. Wopsle. I heard Mr. Hubble remark that “a bit of savoury pork pie would lay atop of anything you could mention, and do no harm,” and I heard Joe say, "You shall have some, Pip." I have never been absolutely certain whether I uttered a shrill yell of terror, merely in spirit, or in the bodily hearing of the company. I felt that I could bear no more, and that I must run away. I released the leg of the table, and ran for my life.

But I ran no farther than the house door, for there I ran head foremost into a party of soldiers with their muskets, one of whom held out a pair of handcuffs to me, saying, "Here you are, look sharp, come on!"

Chapter V

The apparition of a file of soldiers ringing down the butt-ends of their loaded muskets on our door-step, caused the dinner-party to rise from table in confusion, and caused Mrs. Joe re-entering the kitchen empty-handed, to stop short and stare, in her wondering lament of "Gracious goodness gracious me, what's gone—with the—pie!"

The sergeant and I were in the kitchen when Mrs. Joe stood staring; at which crisis I partially recovered the use of my senses. It was the sergeant who had spoken to me, and he was now looking round at the company, with his handcuffs invitingly extended towards them in his right hand, and his left on my shoulder.

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55 See Phelan’s Experiencing Fiction, 95-132.
"Excuse me, ladies and gentleman," said the sergeant, "but as I have mentioned at the door to this smart young shaver," (which he hadn't), "I am on a chase in the name of the king, and I want the blacksmith."56

This is a continuous cliffhanger, as chapter V resumes precisely where chapter IV left off, both temporally and spatially. It is also inconsistent, with the placement of the break shaping the apparent content of the scene. As printed, the reader leaves Pip literally arrested, in the arms of the law. But if we remove the chapter break and read the scene continuously, we get a slightly different story. The same events occur, of course, but Pip’s encounter with the soldier is quickly defused. The cliffhanger appears to objectively confirm Pip’s hitherto subjective sense of guilt. Breaking off as it does, the discourse invites the reader to wonder why Pip has been arrested, and to speculate about what will become of him. Is it because he has stolen the pie? Because he is “naturally vicious,” as Mr. Hubble is fond of reminding him? The cut creates a question that colors our understanding of the scene, and some of the most influential interpretations of the novel have addressed precisely this question, emphasizing this moment to account for Pip’s pervasive guilt.57

If the chapter break fell after “I want the blacksmith” instead, a different issue would stitch together the gap between chapters IV and V. Not why has Pip been arrested? but will Joe assist the soldiers? Will the chase be successful? The question of Pip’s guilt would not disappear, but it would lose its discursive punctuation, which is to say, its apparent urgency as an element of the plot. The chapter break leaves the issue unresolved, sharpening a narrative tension that is, in fact, removed a mere three paragraphs later.

With the cliffhanger, Dickens thus generates a clear difference between what the reader believes is happening and what is actually happening in the scene. The cliffhanger’s inconsistency creates a temporary counter-impression and an enigma that will be quickly cast aside when we recognize that Pip is not wanted by the law, after all. Yet in this case, the false enigma (whence Pip’s guilt?) is actually central to many understandings of the story, despite functioning as a canard with respect to the scene itself. The cliffhanger brings Pip’s guilt into clearer focus by inviting us to dip in and out of the novel with this question and not another, eager for resolution on this front, and not another. The placement of the break produces a narrative question around which the empty space between chapters coheres.

This readerly dynamic is not the sort of reconfiguration Phelan praises in Wharton and McEwan, as it retains many of the basic features of the cheap trick. With respect to the story itself, the cliffhanger makes something out of nothing. But as a result, the reader is invited to ponder a narrative enigma that will continue to inform what does happen, despite disappearing from the story itself. In Phelan’s reading of Wharton, the surprise ending has value insofar as it resolves tensions and instabilities and “opens up dimensions of the narrative that have largely been hidden until that point” (108). But here, Dickens is not, in fact, opening up a new narrative dimension, so much as distilling a thematic dimension from a false narrative lead. Dickens frames a crisis that leads us to expect the other shoe to drop, but then dissolves, rather than resolves, the instability. That the residue of this dissolution – the sense of Pip’s entanglement

with the law as a real, proximate risk – that this residue is retained, is evidence of the cliffhanger’s unique contribution to the readerly dynamics of Dickens’s novel.

A basic question underlies all cliffhangers: why stop telling in the midst of an unfolding scene? The question is most acute in the case of continuous cliffhangers – why stop now if the subsequent chapter will simply continue where the previous one left off? Such breaks become conspicuous because they appear to cede any organizational utility – they pointedly fail to distinguish between significant episodic movements in the narrative. And because resolution for the narrative instability appears imminent, the distinction between scenic time and reading time seems to blur, such that delays in reading are felt as delays in the chronology of story time. We feel, however faintly, that the instability in the story is on the cusp of being resolved now – in real, reading time. Hence the compulsion to turn the page, to keep watching, to “ binge.” And even if readers resist this impulse (or are forced to, by the mechanics of serialization), the cliffhanger colonizes the time spent outside the text, bending the reader’s thoughts towards anticipating, speculating, or otherwise reflecting on a particular narrative problem.

The cliffhanger lends reading a sense of urgency, because delays in the discourse appear to rupture the progression of story. Recall the apocryphal crowd of Old Curiosity Shop readers flocking to the New York docks to ask arriving passengers “is little Nell dead?” For these readers, Nell’s fate is news. Her death is felt to have occurred in the real time between serial installments.58

Cliffhangers prompt anticipation and reflection by manipulating the disjunction between story and discourse so as to render the pace of reading significant to the meaning of narrative. In a sense, cliffhangers turn narrative momentum against itself, marshaling the reader’s desire to know what happens next as a means of opening other axes of connection – transforming “and then? and then?” into “why have we stopped here?” and “what does this moment, this image, this problem say about where we have come, and where we are going?” Articulating the relationship between such rhythms and the problems they frame thus helps to reveal how narratives conceive of their readers.

The cliffhanger shapes the reader’s experience and understanding of narrative through a remarkably simple gesture: the misalignment of story and discourse. In situations where reading further is impossible, the stop compels the reader to anticipate or predict, to look forward to any number of possible outcomes – in other words, to use the materials of the narrative present (and proximate past) to engage the longer temporal arc of the narrative. Because the telling of the story is cut conspicuously short, the cliffhanger demands participation through a distance both symbolic and real – it precipitates an acute form of immediacy between reader and story via the rhetorical refusal to continue telling.59 By isolating the point of ignition between cause and effect, cliffhangers produce a vision of action that will become central to temporal consciousness in the nineteenth century.

58 As Elizabeth M Brennan points out, there is little to support this story, as Dickens’s page proofs were sent to printers in Philadelphia prior to their publication in London. Still, the story has come to signify a broader truth about nineteenth-century reading publics and their experience of fiction. See Brennan’s introduction to the Oxford edition of The Old Curiosity Shop on the legend of the American readers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxii.

As these examples show, the cliffhanger has a long history, a history that reaches all the way back to Homer. And from this survey, however brief, one cannot help but notice an evolution: earlier examples drawn from epic tend to be discontinuous and consistent, while later ones are more often continuous, and more likely to be inconsistent. Romance, in fact, seems to represent something of a turning point, with Ariosto’s cliffhangers representing early examples of continuous, inconsistent cliffhangers – cliffhangers that are more clearly meant to be seen. Ariosto’s playful admonishment of the reader in fact introduces an element that is not quite captured by the terms I have offered so far, by continuity or consistency. A third consideration – something along the lines of tone – may help to describe this general development.

Cliffhangers seem to have different tones. By this I mean, some cliffhangers wink at the reader, others don’t. We might think of this as a question of playfulness, or irony. When a narrator seems to acknowledge that the narration is ending too soon, the cliffhanger comes off as playful, knowing, self-aware or cognizant of a world beyond the diegesis. As a result, the narrative emotion generated by the cut is altered by the narrator’s ironizing distance. In contrast to the question of consistency, which describes the extent to which a crisis framed by a cliffhanger is actually taking, tone has to do with the degree of knowingness imputed to the narrator at such moments: to what extent are we let in on the game? More ironic cliffhangers often make suspense itself the object of satire. Serious cliffhangers, on the other hand, are presented with little distance; the authorial audience is invited to engage earnestly with the question raised by the unresolved crisis, whether that crisis turns out to be legitimate or not.

To put this in more rhetorical terms, ironic cliffhangers emphasize narrative tension at the expense of narrative instability. Tension, we may recall, refers to discrepancies or gaps in knowledge between the narrator and the audience (i.e. gaps at the discursive level), whereas instability refers to conflicts within the story (i.e. conflicts between characters, or between characters and worlds). Playful cliffhangers deflect attention away from the instability at the level of story and fix the reader’s gaze on the discursive tension produced by the cut. For example, recall that in the scene of Ruggiero’s attempted assault on Angelica from Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, the narrator’s direct address to the reader brings into focus our own readerly desire to see what happens next. The protest that “this canto has gone on too long, my Lord, and perhaps you are growing a-weigh with listening to it: I shall defer my story to another time when it may prove more welcome” startles us out of our voyeuristic relation to the scene, by evoking the conditions of our reading, which uncomfortably parallel Ruggiero’s assault on Angelica. We see ourselves being seen, and this alters our relation to the story, exposing our affiliation with Ruggiero and tartly shaming us for it.

Ironic cliffhangers often play up generic conventions or the narrator’s power over the flow of information in order to modulate the affect produced by the cut by inserting critical distance between the reader and the questions raised at the level of story. Early in Don Quixote, for example, Quixote faces off against a Biscayan squire. After several passes and an exchange of blows, the two adversaries face one another for a third pass. Quixote “advanced toward the wary Biscayan, brandishing his sword on high and determined to cleave him in twain.” The Biscayan waits with his sword raised, and “the bystanders stood trembling in fearful suspense, dreading the result of those prodigious blows,” while a lady makes “a thousand vows and

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offeringst to all the statues and places of devotion in Spain that God might deliver the squire and
themselves from so great a peril.” And then, just as the showdown comes to a boil, the narrator
breaks in:

But it is most unfortunate that at this critical moment the author of this history
leaves the battle in mid air, with the excuse that he could find no more exploits of Don
Qui
xto than those related here. It is true that the second author of this work refused to
believe that so curious a history could have been consigned to oblivion or that the wits of
La Mancha could have been so lacking in curiosity as not to possess in their archives or
in their registries some documents referring to this famous knight.
Relying on this belief, he did not lose hope of discovering the conclusion of this
delectable hist
ory, and by the favor of Heaven he did find it, as we shall tell in the second
part.

Here, the generic expectations aroused by the elaborate lead-up to the combat become
themselves the object of satire, miniaturized in mock-heroic fashion by the image of the
trembling bystanders. And the cliffhanger itself puts the exclamation point on this satire, arising
out of an overly inconvenient gap in the archival record. This gap exists to draw the conventional
nature of the scene and the suspense it purports to generate into focus: what seems thrilling and
consequential is in fact silly and conventional. By contrast, epic cliffhangers do not foreground
generic conventions for such subversive purposes. Rather than using cliffhangers to channel
investment away from the story’s instabilities, Homer and Milton instead allow those unresolved
issues to stand, and use narrative irresolution as a means to draw connections across the wider
span of the diegetic world.

We might then venture a hypothesis about the evolution of the cliffhanger form. The epic
cliffhanger tends to be earnest; it exists to mark a legitimate crisis in the world of the story
(which is to say, it is consistent), and it tends to be discontinuous, because its underlying purpose
is not to impress the reader with the severity of this crisis, but rather to expand its causal and
thematic relations across the wider narrative world. Homer does not pivot from Hektor to
Akhilleus to convince us that Hektor’s pursuit is serious, or to demonstrate that it will be
disastrous for the Greeks. Rather, the shift from Hektor to Akhilleus serves to establish the
relation between Hektor’s success and Akhilleus’s absence. It serves an almost analytical
function in the narrative. But as this epic justification for the inconsistent cliffhanger falls away,
we begin to see more continuous cliffhangers, as in the romance and romance-inflected examples
from Ariosto and Cervantes. These cliffhangers are far more playful; they send up the very
generic conventions and discursive conditions that render them possible.61

But something seems to have changed by the nineteenth century: continuous cliffhangers
now become markedly more serious. Without resuscitating the epic convention of discontinuity,
nineteenth-century cliffhangers nonetheless commonly replicate the epic cliffhanger’s more
serious tone.62 The device seems to become a means of lending weight to crises, whether those
crises are legitimate or not. Continuity and consistency, in other words, no longer determine
tone, and by and large the comic flourishes of Ariosto, and Cervantes are traded for a much more

61 Henry Fielding continues this tradition in the eighteenth century, employing narrators who interrupt their tales in
myriad ways to satirize and defamiliarize fictional conventions.
62 Of course, one still finds examples of discontinuous cliffhangers in the nineteenth century. But what strikes me as
particularly novel in this period is the earnest, continuous cliffhanger.
earnest use of delay. The device begins to resemble what we tend to encounter today, especially in television series narratives. Recall the example from Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*; hanging from a cliff, the chapter and serial break falls after the line “Knight felt himself in the presence of a personalized loneliness.” There is nothing ironic about this break – it is meant to underline the dire situation Knight is in, not to interject any ironizing distance into that situation. The cliffhanger earnestly attempts to draw us into the story by casting us out of the text; in terms of its rhetorical effect, it has little in common with Cervantes’s faux panic over the incomplete archival record.

Why does the cliffhanger, and in particular the continuous cliffhanger, become more serious in the nineteenth century? One is tempted to conclude that industrial-scale serialization is responsible for the shift, since it plays such a big role in popularizing the device. Perhaps the rise in serial fiction, and subsequent conventionalization of the cliffhanger, is responsible for rendering it so serious? Roger Hagedorn makes a claim of this sort when he concludes that “at the most basic level, an episode of any one particular serial functions to promote continued consumption of later episodes of the same serial, which is specifically why the cliff-hanger ending was developed.” And Josh Lambert takes up Hagedorn’s point in his discussion of “cliffhanger continuity,” arguing that “cliffhanger continuity is a special…narrative technique enabled by serial publication, the availability of which depends on the synchronization of distribution networks of the medium in which a story is being told, the medium’s capacity to handle summaries, and the feasibility of providing intertextual supplements.” Since the serial is, as Hagedorn points out, chiefly concerned with compelling its reader to consume future installments, it would make sense for serial cliffhangers to adopt a more serious tone. Ironic cliffhangers cast doubt on the crises they frame, after all, thus sacrificing some of the device’s gravitational pull and undercutting the serial’s prime directive of enticing readers to read on.

And yet, while the cliffhanger certainly becomes more common under the regime of serialized fiction, there is reason to suspect that its growing earnestness has roots elsewhere. For one thing, serious cliffhangers feature prominently in non-serial texts in the early nineteenth century, suggesting that the serious cliffhanger is not necessarily a direct outgrowth of serialization. (I will discuss a prominent example of this, from Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*, in the next chapter.) Moreover, if we shift focus away from print narrative and consider developments in other narrative media, we cannot help but notice prominent models of earnest cliffhanging in the theatrical and pictorial arts.

The paradigmatic features of the modern cliffhanger – its continuity and seriousness – seem to emerge from the sister arts of painting and theater, likely because they lack print’s capacity for discontinuity. Because a painting presents the viewer with only a single image, it is only equipped to represent the sorts of narrative instabilities we have seen in continuous cliffhangers: single, climactic scenes, cracked in half to suggest momentous, imminent consequences. And as we will see, in the eighteenth century, a pictorial aesthetics of “momentaneousness” was developed to achieve just such an effect. (I discuss “momentaneousness” in more detail in the next chapter.) Likewise, because scene changes are

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63 Hagedorn, 28. Hagedorn is certainly wrong to say that the cliffhanger emerges from serial publication. It would be more accurate to say that the serial is a mode of narrative distribution that the cliffhanger is well-suited to capitalize on, rather than the other way around. After all, the cliffhanger draws attention to the necessarily serial consumption of all long narrative, not just those narratives produced for developed serial schedules. The serial is unique in its ability to manipulate the rhythms of reading for a mass audience, but, as the examples I have already discussed show, the cliffhanger was absolutely not developed for the serial press.

64 Lambert, 19.
relatively laborious to produce on stage, drama tends to work in a more continuous narrative mode, particularly when it comes to narrative climaxes. Because of the elaborate stagecraft required, sudden shifts in scenic location risk slowing the pace of narration, which could compromise narrative emotions that depend on speed and suddenness. Thus, when it came to depicting narrative crisis, serious painting and drama had to work without recourse to discontinuity; cliffhangers on stage and in paintings could really only be continuous. Hence, cliffhanger effects employed in both theater and painting are more likely to focus on heightening the instability within a single scene or episode, rather than, as in epic, juxtaposing related actions occurring simultaneously.

The melodramatic tableau, a stage convention that had become quite popular by the end of the eighteenth century, offers a case in point. Tableaux (often referred to as “situations” or “pictures” in English dramaturgy), are moments when actors pause mid-gesture to form a picture on stage, in order to, in Martin Meisel’s words, strike “an expressive stance in a legible symbolic configuration that crystallizes a stage of the narrative as a situation, or summarizes and punctuates it.”\(^{65}\) Whether they are consistent or not, they are uniformly continuous – long, prolonged pauses in the unfolding of a single scene. Here, for example, is a tableau from the wedding scene of Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), the first play advertised in English as a melodrama. As revelers prepare for the wedding celebration, the villain Malvoglio arrives to interrupt the proceedings. The stage directions describe Malvoglio’s arrival and identify the precise moment the picture coalesces: “In the midst of the rejoicing the clock strikes; the dancing suddenly ceases; the changing music inspires alarm and dismay. Enter Malvoglio. He stops in the middle of the stage; the company start up; Francisco, Stephano, Selina, and Bonamo, all with more or less terror. The peasants, alarmed and watching; the whole, during a short pause forming a picture.”\(^{66}\) When the action resumes, the wedding is called off by Malvoglio, just as the tableau (or “picture”) portends. The tableau thus isolates a single moment in a continuous scene, and uses that moment to distill the narrative instability of the scene as a whole, encoding a narrative consequence (Malvoglio’s meddling with the domestic harmony of the principle couple) in the action that is happening right now (Malvoglio’s entrance).

The tableau makes the longer arc of the story apprehensible in the fixed moment, encoding “then” in “now,” and transforming the present moment into a trace of the events to come. In this sense, the tableau functions very much like a cliffhanger, on stage. After all, the “picture” is not formed after Malvoglio calls off the wedding, but just before; it is a kind of narrative signpost, granting the audience a chance to anticipate the twist that is about to arrive. And the absolute clarity of this signposting was, to a large extent, the point. As Peter Brooks puts it, “in the tableau more than in any other single device of dramaturgy, we grasp melodrama’s primordial concern to make its signs clear, unambiguous, and impressive.”\(^{67}\)

The melodramatic tableau thus offered one model for the way cliffhangers might signal dramatic urgency by means of the manipulation of narrative temporality. As in many novels that will take up this convention, the pause itself becomes the sign of the tension or imminent crisis. Whether those crises actually arrive or not is another issue, and as we will see, many novels embrace the earnest affect of the melodramatic tableau, without retaining its predictive impulse.

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But the point, as Brooks points out, is really only that the audience is invited to take the tension signaled by the pause seriously – to regard it as essentially declarative: *this is what is happening now*. And in this regard, at least one observer noted the similarity between the theatrical tableau and the sorts of cliffhangers found in novels. In an 1840 essay, Edward Mayhew (Henry’s brother) makes the connection explicit, describing the theatrical “situation” as

> some strong point in a play likely to command applause; where the action is wrought to a climax, where the actors strike attitudes, and form what they call ‘a picture,’ during the exhibition of which a pause takes place; after which the action is renewed, not continued; and advantage of which is frequently taken to turn the natural current of the interest. In its purposes it bears a strong resemblance to the conclusion of a chapter in a novel.  

As the following chapters will show, the historical novel exuberantly adopted melodrama’s cliffhanger model, because the urgency of this more serious continuous cliffhanger offered a useful analogue for the sense of uncertainty that characterized the period’s temporal pressures. In its misalignment of story and discourse, and its earnest presentation of seemingly imminent crises, this sort of cliffhanger distilled the “contraction of the present” that Hermann Lübke sees as emblematic of all accelerating societies: the sense that one’s experience of the past (or “space of experience”) has become less and less relevant for one’s expectations concerning the future (or “horizon of expectations”). Insofar as the past ceases to inform one’s expectations, the very ground of the present seems to become unmoored, uncertain. The serious cliffhanger frames the contracting present as an open question, compelling the reader to anticipate crises based on their understanding of what has come before, while at the same time holding out the possibility what we anticipate is simply an illusion – an effect of our temporal perspective, our position on just this side of the crucial moment. The historical novel took up the cliffhanger to mediate this sense of historical acceleration, and to render the antinomies of modern time sensible.

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68 Mayhew, *Stage Effect: The principles that command dramatic success in the theatre* (London: C. Mitchell, 1840), 44.

2. Scott’s Momentaneousness: Bad Timing in *The Bride of Lammermoor*

You are quite right, dear friend, in what you say on experience. It arrives for individuals always too late, while for governments and peoples it is never available. This is because past experience presents itself concentrated in a single focus, while that which has yet to be experienced is spread over minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; thus similitude never appears to be the same, for in the one case one sees the whole, and in the latter only individual parts.

~ Count Reinhard to Goethe

At the climax of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, Walter Scott frames the pivotal scene with a cliffhanger. The story concerns two feuding Scottish families in the years surrounding the Act of Union in 1707. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Ashtons have taken advantage of political favor to gradually usurp the distressed estates of their rivals, the Ravenswoods, and at the opening of the novel, the Ravenswood property seems to have “melted away like an icicle in thaw.”

Destitute and embittered, Edgar Ravenswood (the sole remaining heir) swears an oath of vengeance on the Ashtons for usurping his ancestral home. Despite his oath, however, the possibility of reconciliation materializes when Edgar falls in love with young Lucy Ashton, and is encouraged in his affections by Lucy’s father William. The two plight their troth in secret, but as the novel moves to its end, Lady Ashton (who stubbornly resists a rapprochement between the families), trumpets a false rumor to convince her daughter that Edgar has married another woman. Distraught, Lucy is coerced into marrying the feckless Laird of Bucklaw, a political opportunist who appeals to Lady Ashton’s vanity. But on the fateful day, just as she is signing the marriage contract, Lucy hears a clamor in the hall without. Certain it’s Edgar, Lucy drops the pen and exclaims “He is come! He is come!” (320). The chapter ends here.

Ending as it does – with Edgar’s arrival portending some intervention – the chapter break signals a possibility that the right marriage (between Edgar and Lucy) may yet come to pass, against all odds. The break is a suspenseful pause that suggests a turn in the plot is coming. Is Lucy’s marriage to Bucklaw truly a done deed? Might Edgar yet persuade the Ashtons to halt the wedding? After all, like the marriage contract, the scene itself is incomplete, compelling the reader to hope that there is still time to set things aright. The narrator encourages this hope, assuring us that “I have myself seen the fatal deed…the last signature is incomplete, defaced and blotted” (320). Ending the chapter here invites the reader to imagine that there is still a chance to

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71 Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 171. The “melting” figure echoes Scott’s comment in his introduction to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* that “the peculiar features [of Scotland’s] manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally [England]” (Edinburgh: Printed by James Ballantyne for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, and A. Constable, 1810), cxxxi. Scott’s aim in *Minstrelsy* is to counteract this dissipation by materializing the oral tradition in print so as to grant it new life, albeit in the form of a commodity circulating in the “sister and ally” nation. *The Bride*, which also claims popular oral provenance, manages its relation to print and the modern British reader in somewhat different terms.
start over, to begin again by brokering peace through tempered, face-to-face conversation. The cliffhanger isolates a moment of possibility that resists the plot’s ferocious momentum.

That momentum is relentless, however, and when the scene resumes in the next chapter all hope of restitution is dashed. Edgar fails to grasp the dynamic of the scene before him, and rather than defend Lucy, he turns on her as though she has willfully betrayed him. “Is that your handwriting, madam?” he demands, before declaring “I must and will hear the truth from her own mouth…I WILL hear her determination from her own mouth; from her own mouth, alone, and without witnesses, will I hear it” (323). Despite this, Edgar allows Lady Ashton to speak for Lucy. She declares that Lucy’s promise to Edgar is meaningless, because it was made without her parents’ knowledge. Edgar scoffs at this justification in terms that underline the historical values in play, charging Lucy with being “willing to barter sworn faith, the exercise of free will, and the feelings of mutual affection, to this wretched hypocritical sophistry” (326). Virtuous hallmarks of enlightened modernity – free will, domestic arrangements premised on romantic affection, and the binding contract of “sworn faith” – are squashed by the baser vehicles of that same modernity: a “hypocritical sophistry” that facilitates marriage as “barter,” or a purely economic arrangement. Though Lucy does not speak, Edgar accepts Lady Ashton’s assurance that Lucy has pledged herself to Bucklaw “without fraud or compulsion,” and Lucy marries Bucklaw with terrible consequences: on the wedding night, in a fit of madness Lucy stabs Bucklaw and dies soon after (327). Later, on his way to meet Lucy’s brother Sholto to duel, Edgar rides into a pit of quicksand and vanishes. Edgar’s death is not witnessed, for as Sholto watches Edgar approach the agreed upon spot, “At once the figure become invisible, as if it had melted into the air,” much like the Ravenswood estate itself (347).

The story’s sad ending raises the question: what does Scott accomplish by dividing the pivotal marriage license scene as he does, interrupting the action to produce a vision of resolution that does not, in fact, come to pass? Given that the questions encouraged by the cliffhanger prove irrelevant to the issue of the scene, what does this cliffhanger do for the novel?

While there is nothing unusual about accentuating a climactic scene with a suspenseful effect, the cliffhanger framing Edgar’s entrance warrants special attention because it intensifies the novel’s exploration of what I will call “bad timing” – a problematic that defines The Bride and distinguishes it from the rest of Scott’s work. The cliffhanger at the climax of The Bride is the clinching moment of the novel’s depiction of a dialectic of history that stands in sharp contrast to Scott’s other fictions. The Bride inverts the developmental logic of Waverley while retaining its structuring relation between individual and socio-historical environment. This relation, which Lukács characterized as one wherein “crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis” is manifest in The Bride as bad timing. Where the co-incidence of personal destiny and historical crisis in Waverley offers a way to imagine political resolution and historical progress, in The Bride history only complicates personal desires and scuttles romantic resolution. History in The Bride interrupts development, keeping characters trapped in inherited structures of strife and animosity. In The Bride, history truly is what hurts.

Scott uses the cliffhanger to capture the dynamics of bad timing and visit them upon the reader. In the novel, characters and narrator alike repeatedly attempt to find new ways forward, to take steps towards a future that would resolve antagonisms and put the past to rest. But at every turn these attempts are foiled by problems of timing – unlucky coincidences, interruptions,

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and sudden reversals. The disjunction between present circumstances, prognosis, and outcome is the very operation the cliffhanger induces in the reader. The cliffhanger draws the moment of reading into the same circuit of temporal delays, interruptions, and false-starts that drives the plot. *The Bride*'s cliffhanger thus uses the conditions of novelistic representation to induce a vision of resolution that is swiftly dispelled, putting us very much in the condition of the characters. The cliffhanger thus implicates our own interpretive activity in the disruptive experience of historical time staged by the novel as a whole.

**MOMENTANEOUSNESS**

Of course, as I discussed in my last chapter, the word “cliffhanger” is anachronistic in this context. This anachronism is justified, however, by the familiarity that Scott and his contemporaries would have had with the narrative technique that the term “cliffhanger” now describes. At once a self-conscious import from older oral traditions and a thoroughly modern flourish, what we now call the cliffhanger was being actively theorized and experimented with across artistic fields in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, for example is Patrick Russell, Scottish naturalist-cum-ethnographer, describing Syrian storytelling techniques in his *Natural History of Aleppo*:

The recitation of eastern fables and tales partakes somewhat of a dramatic performance; it is not merely a simple narrative; the story is animated by the manner and action of the speaker […] He recites walking to and fro in the middle of the coffee-room, stopping only now and then, when the expression requires some emphatical attitude. He is commonly heard with great attention; and not unfrequently in the midst of some interesting adventure, when the expectation of his audience is raised to the highest pitch, he breaks off abruptly, and makes his escape from the room, leaving both his hero or heroine and his audience in the utmost embarrassment. Those who happen to be near the door endeavor to detain him, insisting on the story being finished before he departs; but he always makes his retreat good: and the auditors suspending their curiosity are induced to return at the same hour next day to hear the sequel. He no sooner has made his exit, than the company in separate parties fall a disputing about the characters of the drama, or the event of the unfinished adventure. The controversy by degrees becomes serious, and opposite opinions are maintained with no less warmth than if the fate of the city depended on the decision.74

Russell is authenticating the famous technique deployed by Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, which had itself enjoyed popularity in Britain for some time.75 In Russell’s account, what we can clearly recognize as a cliffhanger is presented as a traditional

73 See above, page 1.
75 Galland’s popular French translation *Les mille et une nuits* began to appear in 1704, and as Srinivas Aravamudan notes, by 1800 there were as many as eighty English editions of the *Nights*. See *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012), 53.
storytelling device – a highly formalized practice grounded in oral tradition. English-language editions of *The Nights* published in the nineteenth century typically cite this anecdote in their prefatory materials, whether or not they actually deploy cliffhangers in their discursive designs. For example, Jonathan Scott cites Russell approvingly in the preface of his 1811 translation of *The Arabian Nights*, and the Reverend George Lamb repeats a nearly identical anecdote in his 1829 *New Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. In the preface to his *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, however, Edward Lane announces that “to avoid the tedious interruptions which occur in the original at the close of each Night, I have divided the translation into chapters, each of which consists of one tale, or of two or more tales connected with another.” But he nonetheless points to Russell’s account as evidence of the “tedious” tradition he eschews.

Scott may well have encountered Russell’s account of Syrian storytelling practices in Jonathan Scott’s edition of the *Nights* (he possessed a copy in his library at Abbotsford), but in *The Bride*, the cliffhanger is grounded more explicitly in another source: the aesthetics of narrative painting, particularly as theorized in the tradition of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose influential essay on *Laocoön* appeared in 1766. Scott broaches this tradition in the opening chapter of *The Bride*, where a dialogue unfolds between narrator Peter Pattieson and his friend Dick Tinto concerning the narrative mode most appropriate to the novel. Tinto, a painter, charges Pattieson with over-reliance on dialogue. “Your characters,” he says, “make too much use of the gob box; they patter too much…there is nothing in whole pages but mere chat and dialogue” (21). Pattieson defends himself, arguing that characters ought to speak in their own voices for readers to understand them. But Tinto is insistent; long passages of dialogue are dull, he says, because they render the story “chill and constrained” (22). For Tinto, the key to a novel is not what characters say, but what they do, and he evokes painting to argue that language is not necessary to “embody the idea” of a scene, or to “impress upon the reader its reality and its effect” (21). He recommends that Pattieson employ less dialogue and more description, for description is to the novel “exactly what drawing and tinting were to a painter; words were his colours, and if properly employed, they could not fail to place the scene, which he wished to conjure up, as effectually before the mind’s eye, as the tablet or canvas presents it to the bodily organ” (22).

Pattieson agrees to try writing a novel Tinto’s way, and in return Tinto supplies him with a subject: a sketch made on a recent trip to Lammermoor, which immediately serves as a test case for Tinto’s assertion that pictorial aesthetics are most effective and efficient. For Tinto, visual description is good because it substitutes “two words” for “pages of talk”; if properly employed, it can render key narrative moments especially powerful (21). But when Tinto reveals his sketch, which depicts a woman watching a debate between her mother and her lover “in an attitude of speechless terror,” Pattieson’s reaction disappoints – he is clearly not struck with the sublimity of the scene (23). Suspecting the problem is perspective, Tinto tries to adjust the viewing conditions to catch the right angle. He tries different positions, closes the shutters to

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block out the light, and rolls up a copy book for Pattieson to use as the “tube of an amateur” (23). Nothing works. Exasperated, Tinto concludes “Mr Pattieson, I used to think you had an eye in your head” (23).

Critics have generally interpreted this dialogue as a satire on Tinto, a failed painter whose notions of fine art are met with justified derision. In such accounts, Tinto’s opposition to dialogue is read as a deeper distrust of drama, and a rash preference for a mode of static pictorialism that the novel ultimately rejects. Along these lines, Daniel Butterworth argues that Tinto is not only set against drama, but narrative itself. He is a “mediocre artist” who cares only for “static images abstracted from the flow of events in the narrative.” For Butterworth, Tinto’s “pictorial mode of perceiving and imagining constitutes a fatally isolating manner of private representation” that stands against the more public, social dialogue championed by Pattieson (1). In this reading, Tinto becomes the spokesman for certain values—social isolation, static perception, the atemporality of painting—that the novel is at pains to substitute with its own preferred ones: public dialogue, narrative development over time, and an openness to socially negotiated standards of taste.

But as Christopher J. Scalia has recently argued, we should be careful not to dismiss Tinto too hastily. Tinto in fact articulates prominent ideas drawn from a tradition of visual theory stretching from Gotthold Lessing to Scott’s friend Benjamin Robert Haydon – ideas that often overlap with Scott’s own. Building on the influential work of Ina Ferris, which demonstrates how Scott resuscitated the novel as a legitimate, masculine, literary form by aligning it with historical writing, Scalia argues that Tinto’s reflections on dialogue represent a related discursive maneuver with respect to the fine arts (rather than historiography). By evoking these aesthetic debates, Scott is strategically positioning the novel within the tradition of other legitimate arts, like painting and drama. Tinto’s comments on dialogue are thus meant to foreground what is formally original about the novel – its capacity for vivid descriptions, which enable readers to visualize scenes. He therefore represents one part in a “multi-front vindication of the novel in which dialogue represents both the traditional and innovative possibilities of the form, its distance from and proximity to more ancient and critically acclaimed arts.”

But Scalia has less to say about how the novel actually works through the aesthetic theory evoked in Tinto and Pattieson’s debate. I agree with Scalia that we should take Tinto more seriously, and that the theoretical genealogy of his prescriptions lends him credence. But the next step is to ask how the novel actually reckons with the dynamics of narration that Tinto champions. For Tinto in fact offers the rudiments of a theory of the historical novel grounded in the dynamics of “momentaneousness” – the notion that whole narrative sequences can be intuited from the felicitous representation of particularly pregnant moments. Tinto’s thoughts on narrative are derived from the painter Henry Fuseli, and by restoring this intertext and then tracing the implementation of his ideas in the narrative practices of The Bride itself, we can begin to see the consequences of this theory for Scott’s larger historical vision.

80 See Ferris, Achievement, 79-104.
81 Christopher J. Scalia, “Walter Scott’s ‘everlasting said he’s and said she’s’: Dialogue, Painting, and the Status of the Novel,” ELH 82.4 (Winter 2015), 1161.
As I have noted, Tinto’s emphasis on the value of description has led some critics to characterize his position as anti-dramatic, even anti-narrative. But in fact, Tinto is opposed to neither drama nor narrative, but to the overuse of dramatic dialogue in the novel. He calls on Pattieson to render the novel more narrative by attending to what is unique about it as a media form. It is not the drama as such that Tinto opposes, but the novel as drama, which is to say, drama in the material form of the book. On stage, visual effects supplement dialogue, but the novel’s comparative lack of visual stimulus necessitates a different narrative mode. Pattieson’s novels read like playscripts, tagged with endless “said he’s” and “said she’s” that impede the reader’s ability to see the narrative unfold. Drama is “a widely different species of composition” from the novel, Tinto says,

Because all, excepting the language to be made use of, was presented to the eye by the dresses, and persons, and actions of the performers upon the stage. But as nothing…can be more dull than a long narrative written upon the plan of a drama, so where you have approached most near to that species of composition, by indulging in prolonged scenes of mere conversation, the course of your story has become chill and constrained, and you have lost the power of arresting the attention and exciting the imagination. (22)

Dialogue ought therefore be limited, Tinto argues. Description, on the other hand, is necessary. But it is important to recognize that Tinto’s descriptive mode is not opposed to narrative, or even to drama. Rather, Tinto calls on Pattieson to render the novel more dramatic (which is to say, more effective) by assimilating the techniques of other media. Descriptive language allows the novel to make scenes visible to the reader in a way that mere dialogue does not. If the novel is to “impress upon the reader its reality and its effect,” it must therefore become more descriptive (21).

For Tinto, description is not an anti-dramatic principle, but a novelistic means of generating what is, in fact, the overriding aesthetic value of drama, painting, and fiction alike: effect. Scott himself makes much the same point in his “Essay on Drama” when he writes that the professors of every fine art operate their impressions in the same manner, though they address themselves to different organs. The painter exhibits his scene to the eye; the orator pours his thunder upon the ear; the poet awakens the imagination of his reader by written description… The tragedian attempts to attain his object still more forcibly, because his art combines those of the poet, orator, and artist, by storming, as it were, the imagination at once through the eye and the ear.”

In each case, the object is to storm the imagination; the question is how best to do it in any given medium.

The distinction is important because dramatism has long been recognized as central to Scott’s innovation in the novel. Lukács highlights “the dramatic character of action and, in close connection with this, the new and important role of dialogue in the novel” as significant elements.

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82 In other words, narration and description are not opposed here, as they are in Georg Lukács’s influential essay “Narrate or Describe?” I will discuss Lukács’s essay and his comments on description in chapter four, below.

of Scott’s contribution to epic literature. And Scott himself commented on the “dramatic shape” of his narrative in almost identical terms two years before The Bride was published. In an unsigned 1817 review of his own Tales of My Landlord for the Quarterly Review, Scott notes that the author had

Avoided the common language of narrative, and thrown his story, as much as possible, into a dramatic shape. In many cases this has added greatly to the effect, by keeping both the actors and action continually before the reader, and placing him, in some measure, in the situation of the audience at a theatre, who are compelled to gather the meaning of the scene from what the dramatis personae say to each other, and not from any explanation addressed immediately to themselves.”

It is significant that the dramatism Scott praises (and which later serves as an important function in Lukács’s theory of the historical novel), is described in terms of positioning – putting the reader “in the situation of the audience at a theatre” – as this recalls Tinto repositioning Pattieson to properly view the sketch. Here, Scott collapses the positions later voiced by Tinto and Pattieson, presenting Pattieson’s stance on the efficacy of dialogue as the best means of achieving Tinto’s goal of narrative “effect.” Allowing the reader to witness the story unfold in scenic time without the mediating voice of the narrator “[adds] greatly to the effect,” because it requires her to decipher the meaning of the scene directly from the characters’ speech, much like, say, Edward Waverley himself. Dramatic dialogue is thus designed to bring the reader face to face with the story, but in The Bride, Tinto insists that too much of it becomes “chill and constrained,” and thus sabotages the very effect it is meant to achieve.

Tinto wants the novel to achieve an even greater immediacy, and he articulates this immediacy in terms of the expressive force of the moment. When Tinto presents his sketch, he declares that the “conception – the expression – the positions” of the figures will “tell the story to every one who looks at [it]” (24). Pattieson protests that he “admired the sketch exceedingly; but that to understand its full merit, [he] felt it absolutely necessary to be informed of the subject” (24). Tinto objects that Pattison is incapable of receiving that instant and vivid flash of conviction, which darts on the mind from seeing the happy and expressive combinations of a single scene, and which gathers from the position, attitude, and countenance of the moment, not only the history of the past lives of the personages represented, and the nature of the business on which they are immediately engaged, but lifts even the veil of futurity, and affords a shrewd guess at their future fortunes. (24)

84 Georg Lukács The Historical Novel, 31.
85 “Art. VIII. Tales of My Landlord,” Quarterly Review 16 (January 1817), 431.
86 I refer here to Gérard Genette’s notion of “scenic” narrative tempo, which designates an equivalence between story time and discourse time. Scenes of dialogue exemplify scenic time, because we may presume that it takes roughly as long for the characters to say their parts as it takes for us to read them. See Genette, Narrative Discourse, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 109. James Buzard argues that in Waverley, Edward Waverley’s unfamiliarity with Scotland acts as a point of identification for English readers, who are likewise forced to glean the meaning of Scottish customs directly from the dialogue between characters. See Buzard, Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), 63-104.
Critics have expressed skepticism over this passage because it seems to invest excessive faith in the revelatory power of the moment, and therefore runs counter to the kind of gradual accrual of meaning that narrative is supposed to provide. Tinto seems to be advocating a duration-less representational practice—an “instant and vivid flash” that reveals everything at once—and critics have been hesitant to associate this position with Scott, whose novels often emphasize gradual change over time. As Daniel Butterworth puts it, “Tinto’s astonishment at Pattieson’s initial failure to comprehend the subject and meaning of the sketch reveals Tinto’s myopia”; Tinto’s “pictorial mode of perception” is “singularly static and private” (5).

But Tinto is not actually advocating the suppression of narrative here. Rather, as Scalia points out, he is articulating a “highly respected strain of visual theory” originating in Gotthold Lessing’s *Laocoön*. Lessing famously observed that the visual arts, unlike poetry, lack time—they are spatial, not temporal. Because of this, the artist must select a single moment for representation, ideally “the most pregnant [moment], the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.” Lessing goes on to claim, contra Tinto, that poetry should “desist entirely from the description of physical beauty as such,” because words arranged in series (i.e. in time) can never hope to communicate the “harmonious action of various parts which can be taken in at a glance” (126). For Lessing, the divide between spatial and temporal arts is absolute—they work by separate means, and therefore must not be mixed or confused.

The more immediate source of Tinto’s sentiments is the painter Henry Fuseli. Fuseli expanded Lessing’s theory of the limits of painting and poetry by propounding what he called “momentaneousness”—a principle of composition that was valued precisely for its narrative quality. Directly tied to the art of effect, momentaneousness describes the degree to which a painting condenses a narrative sequence into a particularly representative moment. Here is Fuseli explaining the concept in a lecture on “invention” at the Royal Academy of Art in 1801:

Those important moments then which exhibit the united exertion of form and character in a single object or in participation with collateral beings, *at once*, and which with equal rapidity and pregnancy give us a glimpse of the past and lead our eye to what follows, furnish the true materials of those technic powers, that select, direct, and fix the objects of imitation to their centre.

A successful painting, Fuseli argues, represents a moment that makes past and future legible: “that transient moment, the moment of suspense, big with the past, and pregnant with the future” (160). These moments almost seem to narrate themselves, by indicating whole sequences of events. Martin Meisel describes Fuseli’s ideal as “a moment of apparent kinesis that somehow extends beyond itself, a moment with a readable past and future, expressed in the energy of its

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87 See Scalia, “Walter Scott’s ‘everlasting said he’s and said she’s,’” 1164.
89 Earlier in the chapter, we learn that Tinto won brief success as an artist, exhibiting several paintings at the Royal Academy, where Fuseli delivered his lectures on momentaneousness.
90 *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831), II:135-6. Fuseli’s lecture was delivered to the Royal Academy in 1801, and published in several collections over the subsequent decades. Though it is not clear that Scott owned any of Fuseli’s publications, he would certainly have been aware of them, as they were advertised and reviewed in *Blackwood’s* and *The Quarterly Review*. Moreover, David Wilkie (the painter Scott most admired), was a student of Fuseli’s at the Royal Academy at the time Fuseli delivered this series of lectures. See Nicholas Tromans, *David Wilkie: The People’s Painter* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 73-4.
agents, alone or in configuration.” Fuseli’s momentaneousness is the iconographic configuration of narrative time that we now call the cliffhanger.

The appeal of momentaneousness becomes more apparent in the context of the Romantic-era art world. For much of the eighteenth century, the subjects of academy paintings were dictated by genre. To reach the highest rank, artists needed to treat subjects their educated audiences could quickly recognize – scenes from national history, classical literature, or the bible. In order for the great history pieces to work, the spectator had to be familiar with the content of the scene in advance, so as to properly assess the artist’s realization. An experienced spectator was thus required for the painting to succeed.

But as the century progressed, painters increasingly found themselves addressing a wider (and often less educated) audience that could not always be counted on to recognize subjects drawn from classical antiquity. Artists began treating scenes drawn from vernacular literature, but Fuseli went even further, inventing subjects from whole cloth. These subjects were impossible to recognize and judge, in the traditional sense, because they had no original sources. To render his subjects intelligible, Fuseli manipulated paratextual conventions – titles and subtitles, gallery catalogue listings, etc. – to situate his scenes generically. Fuseli’s Ezzelin Bracciaferro, musing over Meduna, destroyed by him, for disloyalty, during his absence in the Holy Land, for example, announces itself as a scene from a medieval crusade, and contemporary critics had little difficulty interpreting it as such. Martin Myrone points to the English edition of Johann Caspar Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy as an example of a perfectly lucid interpretation of the painting:

The richness of this composition takes nothing away from its simplicity. It is a Knight who has just assassinated his mistress. Fettered by remorse of conscience, accused by the presence of his victim, he deplores his madness, but repents it not; he detests it, and yet still applauds himself for it. A character of such force was capable of committing a premeditated crime in cold blood. Before giving himself up to it, he beheld it not in all its blackness: and even after the fatal blow, he does not yet feel it in all its enormity.

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92 See Martin Myrone, “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle” Huntington Library Quarterly 70.2 (June 2007), 289-310.
93 Quoted in Myrone “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle,” 299.
Henry Fuseli, *Ezzelin Bracciaferro, musing over Meduna, destroyed by him, for disloyalty, during his absence in the Holy Land* (exhibited 1780), oil on canvas, 50.8 x 45.7 cm.

Despite Lavater’s apparent familiarity with the story depicted here, there was in fact nothing for him to be familiar with: Ezzelin and Meduna were entirely Fuseli’s creation, invented whole-cloth for the painting itself. In other cases, Fuseli provided references to source material that did not exist. His *Belisane & Percival under the Enchantment of Urma* instructed viewers to consult the “Provencal Tales of Kyot,” a source identified as the inspiration for the *Parzival* romance. But as Myrone notes, “the source material is fraudulent,” for Fuseli “depicts a subject taken from a text that never existed, which was in turn meant to be a translation of a further text that never existed either” (300). Fuseli’s paratextual signaling and references to sources and translations lost or nonexistent is continuous with the contemporary literary practice of attributing original productions to purportedly archival sources. In this regard, he joins the ranks of artists and writers (like Scott) deploying the materials and aesthetics of “pastness” for thoroughly modern purposes. Recall Horace Walpole’s attribution of *The Castle of Otranto* to

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94 Lord Byron discovered this in 1814, to his great disappointment, after an exhaustive search for Fuseli’s source. See Myrone, “Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle,” 300.
Gothic sources, Thomas Chatterton’s elaborate construction of the “medieval” romance of Thomas Rowley, and most importantly, James Macpherson’s infamous translation/fabrication of the Ossian fragments – the literary scandal of the century. Like Walpole, Fuseli’s bent is more consistently Gothic, but his methods and aims are clearly of a piece with Scott’s own play with supplementary materials, frame-tales, and mediating figures.

Momentaneity becomes particularly valuable in this context, because it releases the painting from reliance on the spectator’s knowledge of the subject. As Martin Myrone writes, “an individual viewer need only be broadly familiar with the conventions of gothic romance to claim the right of an interpretive engagement with the picture. The sheer physicality of the figures communicates meaning, without being embedded in fully comprehended narrative contexts” (303). One needn’t know a story in advance to make sense of the painting and intuit its narrative drift, because archetypal themes, generic conventions, and striking compositions allowed Fuseli to appeal more directly to the imagination, thus mitigating the need for an informed spectator.

This approach proved advantageous in the increasingly crowded galleries. Myrone argues that Fuseli’s major paintings “were calculated in quite precise ways to function within this socially heterogeneous, and visually complex arena, where individual artworks were constantly threatened with the possibility of being subsumed within an overall optical experience, and where the narrative content of any given work was easily overlooked, extended, or misread” (290). Exhibiting in such conditions, Fuseli recognized that “the role of a painting was not necessarily to fulfill the traditional demands of art as a form of illustration of noble themes. It could embody a much more vaguely conceived idea and serve as a spectacle in its own right, simply to stir interest.”

Insofar as a painting contained its own narrative energy, or told its own story, it had the ability to speak to a wider audience. As the need to reach a broader, more diverse audience renders the work’s autonomy more valuable, momentaneousness emerges as the aesthetic principle best suited to achieve that autonomy.

Recall now that the crux of the disagreement between Tinto and Pattieson is not whether Pattieson’s novels should be more or less narrative, but rather, which practices render his narrative most effective. This is the issue at the heart of momentaneousness. Must an audience be familiar with an artwork’s subject for the work to succeed? Initially, Pattieson claims that something akin to a dramatic experience – hearing the characters express themselves in their own words – is the most “interesting and effectual manner” for a reader to experience a story. Tinto, meanwhile, insists that properly framing striking moments can body forth narrative causality more effectively.

But crucially, in the dialogue between Tinto and Pattieson, both methods fail. When Tinto presents his sketch, Pattieson does not receive any “instant and vivid flash of conviction.” We may therefore be tempted to conclude that the sketch simply possesses little momentaneousness, but, explaining his lack of enthusiasm, Pattieson stresses the shortcomings of dramatic dialogue as well: “were I permitted to peep [in], and see the persons you have sketched conversing in flesh and blood, I should not be a jot nearer guessing the nature of their business, than I am at this moment while looking at your sketch” (24). The painting’s effect, then, is not simply a question of Tinto’s artistic ability; even were Pattieson “in the situation of the audience at a theatre,” as Scott put it in the Quarterly Review, he would be no closer to
understanding. Neither dramatic dialogue nor momentaneous pictorialism work very well, in this instance.

This failure becomes a much larger concern for The Bride. Indeed, given its prominence in the story that follows, interpretive failure may in fact constitute the real point of the opening debate. Scott is not simply pitting painting and drama against one another to signal the tack his novel will take, as some have argued. Rather, he is drawing on contemporary aesthetic theory to exploit the limitations of other arts, and to demonstrate the novel’s own, unique effects.

To this end, The Bride incorporates momentaneousness more broadly as a problem of timing that pervades the novel at nearly every level. Implicit in Tinto’s notion of momentaneousness is the belief that some moments are particularly suited to representation because they are qualitatively different from others – more fully narrative, because more indicative of larger processes of change. To isolate and elevate just the right instant, the artist must have the capacity to discern moments that capture whole sequences of events, rendering cause and effect present all at once. This assumption that complex change over time – the business of history – is, or can be distilled in special pregnant moments, features prominently in The Bride. However, it is repeatedly shown to produce unforeseen, calamitous consequences.

The most compelling example of this failure comes when the novel returns to the actual subject of Tinto’s sketch. The scene is introduced by means of a remarkable cliffhanger, a uniquely novelistic instantiation of the sort of momentaneousness Tinto espouses. This cliffhanger performs the convoluted temporal mechanics of the novel’s bleak historical vision, a vision which repeatedly inverts the developmental logic of other Waverley novels even as it retains the structuring relation between individual and socio-historical world. Where in Waverley (1814), personal destinies are interwoven with historical crises to make available the experience of historical progress towards a recognizable modernity, in The Bride history scuttles resolution, interrupts development, and keeps characters trapped in inherited structures of strife and animosity. In The Bride, history truly is what hurts, because our relationship to it is fundamentally momentaneous.

In what follows, I offer a reading of the novel’s obsession with problems of timing that culminates in the momentaneous cliffhanger – a device that draws the act of reading into a circuit of temporal interruption and delay that reproduces, for the reader, the very same bad timing that drives the plot. The Bride’s cliffhanger draws on the conditions of novel reading to render our own interpretive activity an effect of the disruptive experience of historical time depicted in the novel.

BAD TIMING

The Bride is not like the other Waverley novels, for it relentlessly upends the comic resolution of individual lives within the horizon of public histories.97 In Waverley the violent

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96 George Levine sees the opening chapter of The Bride as a needlessly digressive means of informing the reader that what follows will be more descriptive than the other Waverley novels. See Levine, The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 90.
97 Jane Millgate notes that The Bride enjoys “a special position in the Scott canon as a work somehow different and distinct from both its predecessors and its successors,” and Harry Shaw emphasizes “how far The Bride departs from Scott’s norms in a work like Waverley.” George Levine calls The Bride “a kind of reverse image of Waverley’s tale,” and Ian Duncan sees The Bride as the “sinister reverse-image of the plot of Guy Mannering.” See Millgate Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 169; Shaw “Scott,
clash of the '45 acts as a sobering corrective to Edward’s romantic enthusiasm for the Jacobite cause, leading to a marriage with Rose Bradwardine that augurs (even as it is produced by) the restored union of the modern British state. In *The Bride*, history foils domestic harmony instead of securing it. Familial ties are subordinated to political interests that override personal attachments, and these political forces do not tend towards any recuperating end or vision of future prosperity. If there is a glimpse of historical stability to come in *The Bride*, it is in the fact that the local residents of Wolf’s Hope seem not to care what happens to either family. The struggles are isolated enough that they cannot do much harm to the rest of the community.

The story opens with the funeral of Allan Ravenswood, the last Lord of an ancient Scottish family. Allan fought fiercely at the Battle of Bothwell against the fanatical Whig covenanters, the traumatic national crisis Scott explored in *Old Mortality*. Espousing “the sinking side” at the Glorious Revolution, Allan’s title is abolished (27). Embroiled in financial difficulties, Allan is forced to sell his estate to the “cool lawyer” William Ashton (27). Ashton is the descendant of a family “much less ancient…which had only risen to wealth and political importance during the great civil wars,” and is widely presumed to have wrangled the estate from Allan through “legal toils and pecuniary snares” (27-8). The murkiness of this process is emblematic of Ashton’s conniving character in general. Ashton operates via backchannels, through private communications and insinuations that allow him to disclaim responsibility when it would implicate him in disadvantageous ways.

A series of oppositions is thus established between the families at the outset. The Ravenswoods, a declining race of feudal, militaristic lords with Tory politics and Jacobite sympathies, are opposed to the rising Ashtons, cunning Whig politicians who skillfully navigate the law. These historical, political, and social oppositions find a more immediate expression in their opposed manners: the Ravenswoods are hasty, brash, instinctive; the Ashtons conniving, patient, temporizing; Ravenswood quick, Ashton slow. These different manners are on display in the dispute over religious services performed at Allan’s funeral, at the opening of the novel. Edgar calls for the Scottish Episcopal liturgy in defiance of the Presbyterian law of the land, and the local church-judicatory applies to Ashton, as the nearest privy-councillor, to send an officer to the funeral to halt the service. When the officer attempts to carry out his orders, Ravenswood rebuffs him, and the funeral attendees draw their swords en masse. As the officer retreats to inform Ashton of Ravenswood’s rebellious display, Edgar promises to take revenge on Ashton for the interruption, calling out “Heaven do as much to me and more, if I requite not to this man and his house the ruin and disgrace he has brought on me and mine!” (33) Edgar’s rash show of force is thus reinforced by an act of presentist hubris: an oath that binds the unknowable future into accord with his present feeling. This oath is immediately contrasted with Ashton’s deliberation. Biding his time, Ashton postpones action in the present to better manage his future interests.

Despite Edgar’s penchant for oaths, he nonetheless wavers throughout the novel. After the funeral, he reneges on a plan to accompany two opportunists, Craigengelt and Bucklaw, to France, where they would join the exiled Stuarts. Asked why he considered joining them in the first place, Edgar responds “simply, because I was desperate, and sought desperate associates” (80). What made him reverse course so suddenly? “I had changed my mind…and renounced my enterprise, at least for the present” (80). After Alice warns Edgar not to pursue Lucy because

her destruction, or yours, or that of both, will be the inevitable consequence of her misplaced attachment” Edgar resolves to heed her advice (203). But, pausing for an instant at a fork in the road, he is intercepted by Lucy’s younger brother Henry, who directs Edgar to Lucy waiting at Gothic fountain. There “instead of bidding her farewell, he gave his faith to her for ever, and received her troth in return. The whole passed so suddenly, and arose so much out of the immediate impulse of the moment, that ere the Master of Ravenswood could reflect upon the consequences of the step which he had taken, their lips, as well as their hands, had pledged the sincerity of their affection” (207). Moments like this are always disruptive for Edgar. He is repeatedly mastered by the moment, submitting to the pull of immediate circumstances at the expense of past resolutions or future consequences.

William Ashton is equally cowed by the present, but rather than act, he temporizes. Conscious that the political winds are shifting and the rival Tories may soon come into power, Ashton contemplates the good an attachment between Edgar and Lucy might serve for his fortunes (and his ability to retain the Ravenswood estate). The only problem is Lady Ashton, who harbors an unyielding hatred of the Ravenswoods. “What will Lady Ashton say?” Ashton worries, before the narrator scornfully summarizes his course of action: “he came at length to the resolution in which minds of a weaker cast so often take refuge. He resolved to watch events, to take advantage of circumstances as they occurred, and regulate his conduct accordingly” (169). Unlike Edgar who constantly attempts to take control of his future by binding it to the present, Ashton respects the volatility and indeterminacy of the present. He prefers to defer action, to see how things play out, and to take advantage of future opportunities.

In characterizing these two different modes, The Bride elaborates and complicates the famous passage in chapter one of Waverley, in which Scott offers an analogy to illustrate his novelistic project. Aiming for a description of “men” rather than “manners,” Scott allows that he must nonetheless attend to the coloring cast by “the state of manners and laws” in a particular period. The underlying object, though, remains the same:

The wrath of our ancestors, for example, was coloured gules; it broke forth in acts of open and sanguinary violence against the objects of its fury: our malignant feelings, which must seek gratification through more indirect channels, and undermine the obstacles which they cannot openly bear down, may be rather said to be tinctured sable. But the deep ruling impulse is the same in both cases; and the proud peer, who can now only ruin his neighbor according to law, by protracted suits, is the genuine descendant of the baron who wrapped the castle of his competitor in flames, and knocked him on the head as he endeavoured to escape from the conflagration.

Whereas in Waverley, Scott asserts a genealogical continuity between the older violent class and the modern bureaucratic one, in The Bride the historical distance that preserves their shared nature is collapsed, rendering the conflict of manners the very motor of plot. The proud peer and the baron are now neighbors, not descendants of one another. The Bride thus puts another key twist on the Waverley analogy: a family colored gules has its estate usurped by a neighbor tinctured sable. By removing the generational separation, The Bride lays bare the conflict between neighbors that results from the superimposition of manners determined by (and emblematic of) competing historical orders. Reconciliation between Ashton and Ravenswood remains out of reach not simply because good will is lacking on either side – they share the same

ruling impulse, after all – but because even when they share a common object, they cannot synchronize their actions, for they are temporally oriented in fundamentally different ways. Ravenswood reacts, Ashton waits. If the men (and their objects) are the same, their different manners prevent them from benefiting from it.

The story thus proceeds through a series of temporal dislocations, false-starts, and unfortunate coincidences. Even moments of continuity and synchrony – places where timing appears harmonious – are repeatedly undermined, trumped by the sins of the past or hubris concerning the future. When Edgar conciliates with William Ashton by calling him “my generous friend,” the narrator immediately cancels the statement’s reparative force, noting that the gesture is fruitless because Edgar’s earlier “vows of vengeance...had been heard and registered in the book of fate” (181). And when Lady Ashton rudely orders Edgar out of her house, she justifies her inhospitality by expressing outrage that he has engaged himself to Lucy without a parental blessing. But this is a lie, as Lady Ashton only learns of Lucy and Edgar’s engagement after ordering him off the estate. William Ashton mutters that “it is a cause…which has emerged since the effect has taken place” (241). In The Bride, the present is overwritten by past and future such that the causal force of action is unmoored from intention. Actions come to appear the mere effects of determining energies operating beyond anyone’s ken.

The bad timing plaguing the plot is intrinsic to the novel’s historical setting, the “slidderly times” around the 1707 Act of Union, or “the margin between the end of the old political order and the advent of the new,” as Ian Duncan puts it (136). The most striking feature of the setting is its undecidable relationship to the shape of the narrative. It isn’t clear exactly when the events of the story take place with respect to its historical crisis, as Scott seems unsure whether to set the novel just before or just after the Union. Comparing the first, 1819 edition to the 1830 Magnum Opus edition, Jane Millgate shows that details suggesting a pre-Union setting in the first edition are replaced by post-union references in the second.99 No mere curiosity, this historical indeterminacy represents a problem for the Lukácsian vision of the historical novel, because it threatens to undo the feature he regards as central to Scott’s innovation.100 Rather than revealing the relationship between personal destiny and historical reality, the wavering date of The Bride’s action muddies the connection. As Millgate points out, the two texts suggest very different historical visions:

In the text Scott originally composed and published the final effect, despite the formal tragedy, is in historical terms quite positive: such historical circumstances as play a part in Ravenswood’s fate are presented as the product of a particular situation of limited duration. In the later version the destruction of Ravenswood takes on an element of the gratuitous: the times have already changed, the great boundary-line of the Union has been crossed, and yet the outcome for Ravenswood must still be disastrous. (211)

The historical setting is vital to the story’s outcome, because the shifting political winds (and everyone’s attempts to benefit from them) determine so many actions (Ashton’s appeal to the privy council, his encouragement of Lucy and Edgar’s romance, The Marquis of A—’s involvement in Edgar’s love life, Edgar’s undisclosed mission on the continent). Yet, at the same time, the Act of Union itself apparently has no bearing on the story, because the story is

100 The Bride is one of the few Waverley novels Lukács does not mention in The Historical Novel.
unchanged regardless of whether the action is set before or after the Union. As Millgate says, the novel’s historical vision is far bleaker if it is set after, but the outcome of the narrative is the same.

Scott emphasizes the shifting political winds of this epochal threshold by inverting the political-generational correspondence we might expect to find in the characters. Here, the young, politically progressive Edgar is taxed with carrying on the traditions of the old feudal order, while old Ashton cannily manipulates law and party politics, mechanisms of the new order. By inverting the political allegiance of the generations (young Edgar standing with the Tories, old Ashton with the Whigs), Scott moves beyond straightforward political allegory to tell a bleaker story of historical extinction. This is not, like Waverley, a world in which the new puts the old to rest, because here old and new are one and the same. The categories aren’t accurate, because history itself has not yet sorted out what constitutes progress, what delay.

The moderate Edgar, after all, looks towards the harmonious future of an enlightened civil society in which no single political class is sovereign. When Edgar expresses unwillingness to support the Stuarts, Bucklaw accuses him of mourning “the crop-eared dogs, whom honest Claver’se treated as they deserved” (101). Bucklaw, Edgar’s bad double in the novel, gives vent here to the sort of uncompromising Jacobitism associated with Edgar’s father Allan, who participated in Claverhouse’s campaign against the covenanters. Despite his family legacy, however, Edgar defuses Bucklaw’s charge, replying “I hope to see the day when justice shall be open to Whig and Tory, and when these nick-names shall only be used among coffee-house politicians, as slut and jade are among apple-women, as cant terms of idle spite and rancor” (101). Edgar is figured as the precursor of the more conciliatory political climate that emerges by the end of Waverley. And despite the fractious character of the times he finds himself in, Edgar confidently predicts a more harmonious future, reasoning that “as social life is better protected, its comforts will become too dear to be hazarded without some better reason than speculative politics” (101). Optimism aside, this explanation is deliberately anachronistic, looking forward a good fifty years to Scottish Enlightenment faith in the civilizing influence of commercial society. The comforts of social life, too dear to sacrifice for mere politics: this sounds like David Hume or Adam Smith, describing a commercial society that represents, in John Burrow’s words, the “characteristic form of modernity…not a type of polity…but a tissue of manners and modes of social behavior.”

The point here is not so much that Edgar represents an anachronistic vision of historical progress, but that he is fundamentally divorced from his historical moment. His very moderateness is out of place with the period. Ina Ferris puts it nicely: “[Edgar] is not in tension with or in opposition to his age so much as he is disconnected from it.” Yet this does not release Edgar from the burden of the past: he is still his father’s son, the displaced heir and agent of vengeance. He is both the vehicle of an older vengeful order, and the promise of a new,

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101 Some of the most virtuoso scenes in Old Mortality focus on Claverhouse’s battles with the covenanters. In that novel, however, moderate, compromising tempers are validated over fanatical extremism. In The Bride, moderation becomes the mark of weakness (Ashton), or credulity (Edgar).
102 Early on Edgar resists the urge to join the Stuarts in France; later, after plighting his troth to Lucy, he shows himself willing to accommodate Lucy’s Presbyterianism.
peaceful one. Torn between past and future, he repeatedly fails to act effectively by controlling his place in the present, because the present simply is not stable enough to permit such control.

We see this failure right away. Edgar’s subjugation to the present begins with the oath he swears at his father’s funeral and is compounded as the mourners repair to Wolf’s Crag, the lonely cliff-side tower where Edgar must live following the loss of the Ravenswood estate. There, gloomily presiding over a recently outlawed custom, Edgar watches his guests “drink deep healths to the memory of the deceased…The tables swam in wine, the populace feasted in the court-yard, the yeoman in the kitchen and buttery; and two years’ rent of Ravenswood’s remaining property hardly defrayed the charge of the funeral revel!” (34). The scene echoes Hamlet’s lament to Horatio, that “the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.” 105 The funeral-feast is attributed to an abolished custom, thus casting it as a rebellious stand for tradition, an assertion of the past’s continued relevance. But this assertion takes on a grotesque, decadent air: tables swimming in wine, two years of an already meager rent squandered in an evening. The sheer scale of the present – its capacity to devour the resources of the past and the promise of the future – is overwhelming. Following the funeral Edgar is essentially impoverished.

The reader is implicated in the historical vision represented here. As the chapter draws to a close, the narrator shifts into a summarizing, adjudicating mode (adopting the gnomic present tense that George Eliot will inherit from Scott). The events of the day are first absorbed into local tradition, with the narrator evoking a peasant who “affirms, that on this fatal night the Master of Ravenswood, by the bitter exclamations of his despair, evoked some evil fiend, under whose malignant influence the future tissue of incidents was woven” (35). The narrator quickly dissents, however, domesticating the evil fiend by providing a more modern, psychological take on the story: “Alas! What fiend can suggest more desperate counsels, than those adopted under the guidance of our own violent and unresisted passions?” (35). James Kerr reads the narrator’s interjection here as a patronizing rationalism designed to grant the reader a degree of detached sympathy for Ravenswood: “the narrator’s language instructs the reader to regard Ravenswood as the unfortunate victim of his own untrammeled emotions. The implication is that we, narrator and reader, are superior to Ravenswood because we know that his gestures are the result of a lack of control…In league with the novel’s narrating voice, we translate the mysterious forces embodied in the feudal figure of Ravenswood into the intelligible terms of human psychology.”106 This reading nicely highlights what is at stake in the narrator’s mediating impulse, but I’m not sure the narrator’s gloss is as successful as Kerr suggests. If anything, the juxtaposition of peasant superstition and psychological explanation via an exhausted “Alas!” seems to illustrate the failure of either to adequately account for the “future tissue of events.” Edgar’s fate isn’t the result of unmanaged emotion any more than it is the work of an evil fiend. Attempts to grasp the meaning of the moment proliferate, but never reveal the causal machinery upon which its significance is predicated.

The failure to apprehend the meaning of the moment arises from the fact that so many forces are in play at any given time. This is particularly clear in the scene in which Lucy and Edgar first meet. In chapter four, Lucy takes her father to visit Alice Gray, an old blind woman who is permitted to retain her cottage on the Ravenswood estate after its transfer to Ashton’s control. Alice warns Ashton that he is “on the brink of a precipice,” and that he mustn’t provoke

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105 The scene also looks forward to the many bridal/burial juxtapositions that proliferate toward the end of the novel.
106 “Scott’s Dreams of the Past: The Bride of Lammermoor as Political Fantasy,” Studies in the Novel. 18.2 (Summer 1986), 129.
Edgar because “he is still a Ravenswood, and may bide his time” (51-2). Alice is referring to the Ravenswood family motto, derived from a bloody episode in the family history that hovers over the story throughout. Supplanted from his estate, Edgar’s distant ancestor Malisius one night snuck into his usurper’s castle with a band of loyal supporters. The usurper is holding a banquet, and when he calls to be served, Malisius places “the ancient symbol of death” – a bull’s head – on the table and declares “I bide my time” (38). On this signal Malisius and his men set to their bloody work, and the estate is restored to the Ravenswood line. As a descendant of Malisius, Alice warns, Edgar may simply be waiting for an opportune moment to take his revenge.

In the next chapter Lucy and her father walk home, contemplating Alice’s warning in stunned silence. Lucy is particularly worried by Alice’s words, but when asked why she looks so pale, Lucy prevaricates. The narrator explains:

According to the ideas of the time, which did not permit a young woman to offer her sentiments on any subject of importance unless especially required to do so, Lucy was bound to appear ignorant of the meaning of all that had passed betwixt Alice and her father, and imputed the emotion he had observed to the fear of the wild cattle which grazed in that part of the extensive chase through which they were now walking. (54)

“The ideas of the time” force Lucy to feign ignorance rather than reveal her true sentiments, leading her to attribute her anxiety to a fear of the wild cattle, rather than Alice’s warning. But Lucy’s dodge doesn’t work, as the bull is itself the symbol of Ravenswood’s lust for vengeance. The irony is elaborated in the narrator’s description of the cattle themselves, “descendants of the savage herds which anciently roamed free in the Caledonian forests, it was formerly a point of state to preserve a few in the parks of the Scottish nobility” (54). Like Edgar, these cattle are the descendants of a savage breed, once installed on the estates of landed nobility but now adrift in a world ill-equipped to accommodate them. Acting in obedience with the manners of her age, Lucy unknowingly attributes her discomfort to the wild remnant of the ancient order of Scottish nobility. In other words, to Ravenswood – the subject of Alice’s warning in the last chapter.

As soon as Lucy imputes her fear to the cattle, “a bull, stimulated either by the scarlet colour of Miss Ashton’s mantle, or by one of those fits of capricious ferocity to which their dispositions are liable, detached himself suddenly from the group...approached the intruders on his pasture ground, at first slowly, pawing the ground with his hoof, bellowing from time to time, and tearing up the sand with his horns, as if to lash himself up to rage and violence” (55). What begins as a cover for her real emotions – a veil drawn over true feeling in accordance with propriety – suddenly becomes a very real threat, as the bull turns to charge. At this point, “it seemed inevitable that the father or daughter, or both, should have fallen victims to the impending danger, when a shot from the neighbouring thicket arrested the progress of the animal” (56). Edgar has just saved Lucy and her father from the charging bull, but before his identity is revealed, we get a gruesome description of the bull’s fall: “stumbling forward with a hideous bellow, the progressive force of his previous motion, rather than any operation of his limbs, carried him up to within three yards of the astonished Lord Keeper, where he rolled on the ground, his limbs darkened with the black death-sweat, and quivering with the last convulsions of muscular motion” (56). Though the sight is grotesque, it is the sudden shift of fortune that affects Ashton most: “Lucy lay senseless on the ground...Her father was almost equally...
stupefied, so rapid and unexpected had been the transition from the horrid death which seemed inevitable, to perfect security” (56).

In this sequence, the competition between temporal modes oppresses the moment, determining its significance even before it has a chance to play out. First we encounter a kind of cyclical model of causality in Alice’s warning that Ravenswood’s past bodes ill for the future. This cyclical perspective then gives way to decorum – “the ideas of the time,” which, like fashion, constitute a system of behavior, the arbitrariness of which is grounded on contemporaneity above all – in the form of gendered manners that force Lucy to hide her true feelings. For the reader, however, Lucy’s submission to the “ideas of the time” ironically underlines the relevance of Alice’s warning, as Lucy ends up attributing her distress to the bull, Edgar’s semblable. Still, when Edgar saves his usurper from the charging bull, the novel would seem to invert Alice’s omen and signal a reparative reformulation of the past on the horizon. The symbol of revenge is recast as one of protection, after all. Yet if the narrator allows that what “seemed inevitable,” is suddenly averted, he nonetheless couches this escape in figures that undercut individual agency as the force of change. Though normally scrupulous in tracing causes, the narrator is ultimately ambivalent about why the bull actually charges. Was it simply a capricious fit, or did Lucy’s scarlet mantle provoke the bull? Meticulously describing the bull’s charge towards the Ashtons as “the progressive force of his previous motion,” and not “any operation of his limbs,” the narrator erases intent from the calculus of causality; the effects of all actions, all behavior modes, and all temporal orientations tend the same way. Edgar rescues Lucy, and the seeds of their mutual affection (and hence, downfall) are planted. Just as the demands of the present squander Edgar’s resources in the funeral scene, here the moment absorbs the extraordinarily diverse causal forces (history, legend, decorum, instinct) and bends them all towards the same end. The moment is so fundamentally overdetermined, it feels as if time itself menaces these people.

SIGN AND SEAL

I have been attending to the way problems of timing structure the novel’s plot and characterization, and how these problems emerge in the conflict between overdetermined moments and the historical or narrative progressions those moments disrupt. The novel’s climactic cliffhanger replays this tension, but in addition, it pointedly burdens the reader with reckoning its meaning. Neither the characters nor the narrator offer any guidance in disentangling the competing forms of causality that animate the novel’s key moment. Thus, like the encounter with the charging bull, the cliffhanger scene serves not only to orchestrate an important exchange in the plot, but to illustrate, at a more fundamental level – indeed, at the level of textual form itself – the overwhelming scale of the moment in this novel, its capacity to absorb and blend competing causal systems, forcing even the narrator to throw up his hands. The issue, the cliffhanger reveals, is that moments in The Bride are too big with the past, too pregnant with the future.

And in this respect, we might say that Scott doubles down on the momentaneous principles articulated by Tinto at the outset of the novel. The cliffhanger is designed to overwhelm the reader herself with an excess of causal signification. The narrative expediency of Tinto’s momentaneous aesthetic – our supposed capacity to read past and future in the contours of the present – is put to the test in the devastating last gasp of cliffhanger. As Lucy struggles to sign the deed that will separate her from Edgar and bind her to Bucklaw, Edgar arrives to interrupt the proceedings. When Lucy hears him approach, she drops the pen and exclaims “He is come – he is come!” As she cries out, the chapter abruptly stops. What follows in the next chapter is the very scene depicted in Tinto’s sketch.

Scott is acutely aware of effects of bibliographic conventions, so his decision to end the chapter here should not be overlooked. The break is clearly meant to feel abrupt, for chapter is the shortest of the novel by far. And the abrupt stop in the discourse signals that the moment is incomplete, and the first sentence of the subsequent chapter reinforces the scene’s continuity, indicating the pace with which these events all take place: “Hardly had Miss Ashton dropped the pen, when the door of the apartment flew open, and the Master of Ravenswood entered” (321). In the story, this all happens in the space of a moment, but in the discourse, Ravenswood’s arrival requires its own chapter. If a scene is in the midst of unfolding, and the narrative needn’t shift to incorporate another scene happening elsewhere, why stop at all? And the location of the chapter break is even more conspicuous because the story itself comes to a pause just three paragraphs later, when “planting himself full in the middle of the apartment,” Edgar “said not a single word, and there was a deep silence in the company for more than two minutes” (322).

Rather than locate his chapter break here, Scott purposefully disrupts the temporal experience of the book, subjecting the reader to the very bad timing that has been driving the plot all along. As Lucy struggles to complete the last signature, we read:

Lady Ashton’s vigilance hastened to supply the deficiency. I have myself seen the fatal deed, and in the distinct characters in which the name of Lucy Ashton is traced on each page, there is only a very slight tremulous irregularity, indicative of her state of mind at the time of the subscription. But the last signature is incomplete, defaced and blotted; for, while her hand was employed in tracing it, the hasty tramp of a horse was heard at the gate, succeeded by a step in the outer gallery, and a voice, which, in a commanding tone, bore down the opposition of the menials. The pen dropped from Lucy’s fingers, as she exclaimed with a faint shriek – ‘He is come – he is come!” (320)

The narration takes on a möbius quality here, and the temporal gymnastics it performs are breathtaking. Lucy’s difficulty signing the document is vouchsafed by reference to the narrator’s contemporary moment, as Pattieson references the archival document itself to authenticate the scene via its putative source material. But what makes the document authentic is its illegibility – it is “incomplete, defaced and blotted” – an illegibility accounted for by an interruption in the past: Edgar’s arrival. And in a wonderful irony, to make this historical claim, Pattieson must transform writing into a pictorial system, subject to the mode of perception Tinto championed

108 Think of the “humble English post-chaise” analogy, or the “shall this be a short or a long chapter?” digression in Waverley, or the dropped stitch discussion in The Heart of Midlothian. See also Andrew Piper’s reading of Scott as editor in Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 97-120. 109 Chapter thirty-two is roughly 1200 words. On average, chapters in The Bride are about three times as long.
back in chapter one. The “position, attitude, and countenance of” of Lucy’s signature indexes her emotional state, revealing her nervous submission to the parental dictate. As archival trace, the signature contains its own momentaneous energy; its incompleteness indicates, down to the moment, the actual timing of Ravenswood’s arrival, and the impact of that arrival on Lucy.

And the cliffhanger incorporates Tinto’s aesthetic principle at an even more fundamental level, as well. Pattieson’s description of the incomplete signature is doubled by the incompleteness of the narrative discourse, which produces an extra-diegetic pause – not a lull in story-time, but a deliberate freeze in discourse-time that points to a dramatic climax. Like Lucy’s signature, the chapter itself is interrupted by Edgar’s arrival. The pause invites us to imagine some turn, some action that could resolve the sad scene before us. Will Edgar halt the proceedings? Is Lucy’s incomplete signature a sign not only of Edgar’s arrival, but of a salvaged union?

Ending the chapter too soon, before the scene has played out, the cliffhanger offers a vision of amelioration, the last such vision in the novel. Such a happy resolution has of course been denied from the start, ruled out by the plot’s tragic structure. The cliffhanger thus constitutes a moment of resistance to the force of the narrative: to imagine that Ravenswood’s suit could succeed here would require forgetting what we have witnessed thus far. Only insofar as the discourse literally stops are we permitted to glimpse a happy ending.

Stopping the discourse at this perfectly wrong moment shows the cliffhanger resisting the novel’s machinery in another sense as well, for the cliffhanger undercuts the book’s implicit accommodation of the reader’s time. One of the conveniences of book technology, as Pattieson notes in the first chapter, is that the pages may "be opened and laid aside at pleasure," which renders the book ideal for unstructured leisure time (13).\textsuperscript{110} Because book reading needn’t be planned or synchronized like other entertainments (such as theatrical performance, or the public exhibition of a painting), reading possesses great temporal flexibility -- it can fill up the odd hour here or there. And the chapter break is the bibliographic convention that facilitates this flexibility, synchronizing the rhythm of consumption with the rises and falls of the narrative. As Nicholas Dames puts it, the novelistic chapter “aerate[s] the reading experience by providing internal breaks that allow us to put the book down.”\textsuperscript{111}

But the cliffhanger breaks this sense of synchrony, compelling the reader on through a breach of the decorum implicit in the book’s form: when the chapter break arrives, the episode is not resolved. The time is thus disorganized in the book itself. If one of the great features of the novel is that its pages can be “opened and laid aside at pleasure,” the cliffhanger sabotages that accommodation. The cliffhanger demands that the reader read on now, charging the reader’s present moment with a sense of urgency.

In the case of \textit{The Bride}, turning the page produces a grim irony. The bad timing of the cliffhanger produces a vision of the very resolution that has been denied throughout by the novel’s reliance on bad timing as the motor of the plot. The insistence that actions and intentions never align is thus reproduced in a misalignment of narrative discourse through which we glimpse the progressive, ameliorative resolution of the other Waverley novels. But this gesture is

\textsuperscript{110} Pattieson’s contention resonates with Ian Watt’s account of the rise of the novel as a bourgeois form, well-suited to the parameters of middle-class, domestic life. See \textit{The Rise of the Novel} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 35-59.

\textsuperscript{111} “Trollope’s Chapters” \textit{Literature Compass} 7.9 (2010), 857. Since the novel is a continuous form (we read from beginning to end, rather than skipping from chapter 23 to chapter 6 to chapter 14), the chapter convention has less to do with navigability (finding your way to this or that bit), and more to do with adapting the long narrative form to the stop-and-go of reading.
self-defeating, insofar as the cliffhanger demands, above all else, that we read on. The discursive bad timing that evokes a restored Lucy-Edgar pairing also produces the very momentum that dissolves that restoration by delivering the reader into the scene of Edgar’s dialogue with Lucy and Lady Ashton, where any possibility of optimism is permanently eradicated. By propelling the reader onward, the cliffhanger forecloses the period (in reading time) in which we are permitted to imagine the progressive resolution typical of the Waverley novels. And as if to underline the impossibility of that progress, the scene that follows is itself a perverse return, in two senses. It returns us to the beginning of the novel by re-narrating the sketch presented by Tinto in chapter one, and it entrenches the familial opposition between Ravenswoods and Ashtons – the antagonism out of which the plot has developed from the start. Failing to recognize Lady Ashton’s controlling hand, Edgar savages Lucy for breaking her vow to him – that is, for failing to keep faith with her past promise. Lucy’s broken promise thus revives Edgar’s own oath, sworn in chapter two, of vengeance against the Ashtons. Three chapters from the end, we’re right back where we started.
3. “Death, by far the easiest”: Flawed Endings in *A Tale of Two Cities*

It is one of the great charms of books that they have to end.

~ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

*The Bride of Lammermoor*, particularly in the revised *Magnum Opus* edition of 1830, makes the discomforting suggestion that the partisan politics responsible for exacerbating the tension between the Ravenswoods and Ashtons have not subsided following the Act of Union. The political winds rising from the new dispensation in 1707 do little to cool entrenched resentments, and the result is the eradication of both families. In terms of historical allegory, there is little recompense on offer: like the bridegroom in Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner,” Bucklaw has grown a sadder and a wiser man, and that’s about it. The community of Wolf’s Hope, meanwhile, is only too ready to leave feudal relations behind, as there is no longer anything to gain from lordly patronage. That the configuration of the nation at the end of the novel persists into Scott’s present seems no cause for comfort. Better to let the past be past.

But for Charles Dickens, keeping the past in the past was not easy. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens’s mature return to the form Scott pioneered, the past haunts the present. This haunting is most palpable at the level of form, for in *A Tale*, Dickens set out to make an old form new – to refashion the historical novel for a much-changed literary scene. His first historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, had appeared in the decade following Scott’s death, the era of the historical novel’s generic dominance. When he published *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841, Dickens was a young writer trying his hand at the preeminent form of the age, hoping to achieve some of the commercial success Scott had enjoyed. But when *A Tale of Two Cities* was published nearly twenty years later, much had changed. Dickens was now established as the preeminent novelist of the day, secure enough to break with his publishers Bradbury and Evans and launch a new magazine, *All the Year Round*, with Chapman and Hall. Meanwhile, as a genre, the historical novel no longer commanded quite the respect it had several decades prior. Though by no means dead, historical fiction had lost its place atop the generic rank. It had become one of many special genres competing in a more crowded literary field.112 For Dickens, nearly without rival in the literary sphere, taking up the old form thus represented something more than an act of nostalgia. It was a true experiment, an attempt to make the old new, to bring the past into the present in a more immediate and accessible way.

Dickens’s experiment with history is announced in the novel’s opening lines, which betray a new sense of what constitutes history, and in particular, historical crisis. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”; these lines distill the shift in the concept of historical crisis that has taken place in the years separating Scott and Dickens.113 As I noted in my introduction, Scott’s fiction, and in particular his representation of historical crises, worked dialectically: a current of everyday time, or *Chronos*, is inevitably shattered by the fitful paroxysms of *Kairos*, the significance of which is registered in the ways it disrupts or reroutes quotidian life. Crisis, in

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other words, has visible effects on the world – it marks a turning point, after which things will no longer be the same. The potential energy possessed by history in Scott is apparent from the very start; the epigraph to Waverley – “Under which king?” – presents a binary loaded with consequence – “speak, or die!” By contrast, Dickens begins A Tale with a series of oppositions hollowed of significance. The implicit “ands” between the anaphora rattled off in the opening are telling; where the torque of Scott’s sense of historical crisis is generated through the challenge of an either/or, Dickensian crisis is the product of this and. The effect is at once bombastic and exhausting. The oppositions cynically paraded in the novel’s first sentence – best and worst, wise and foolish, belief and incredulity, light and dark, hope and despair, everything and nothing, Heaven and Hell – are so baldly Manichean they fail to define “The Period” in any meaningful way. Instead, these antagonisms leach away historical peculiarity to the point that the narrator is compelled to assert the Revolution’s essential equivalence with the present: “the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only” (5). The age of Revolution never resolved, for its underlying urges are our own.\(^{114}\) This is a vision of historical endlessness. It is also quite different than what we find in Scott. In A Tale, historical crises no longer carry the sense of decisiveness they had in Scott’s work, and for this reason, it is difficult for Dickens to imagine how something like the French Revolution might bear a generative relation with the present. When Dickens looks to the Revolution, what appears foremost is the possibility of its repetition.\(^{115}\) The Revolution is a warning – a vision of the sort of thing that might come to pass if changes are not made.\(^{116}\) This analogical value is present in Scott as well, but there the value of crisis for historical narration was its capacity to articulate turning points, moments before which the world was one way, and after which it became something else. The irrevocable character of the crisis was therefore paramount: one phase ends, another begins. But when crisis is no longer definitive, its utility as a means of understanding historical development comes into question. Crises do not lose their seriousness, or become less dangerous; rather, they blur together, as every eruption begins to look like the manifestation of a more deeply entrenched problem, a problem that may never be resolved fully. By this light, historical conflicts are not the products of particular communities or moments, because they lie deeper. Endemic to the very material of man, crises do not so much resolve as erupt and abate, endlessly repeating themselves in one form or another.

\(^{114}\) This sentiment was likely the product of Carlyle’s influence. For Carlyle, “There is a deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society; a boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old. The French Revolution, as is now visible enough, was not the parent of this mighty movement, but its offspring.” See Carlyle, “Signs of the Times,” in Carlyle: Selected Works, Reminiscences and Letters ed. by Julian Symons (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), 43. Originally published in the Edinburgh Review, June 1829.

\(^{115}\) Given the steady series of revolutions and reactions in France between 1789 and 1859, it is not so hard to understand why.

This sense of repetition is central to the paradoxical cast crisis takes in *A Tale*. Crisis now ceases to signal the ends of historical processes, following which communities might be accommodated to one another. And insofar as it loses its capacity to signal the imminence of an end, a crisis also ceases to confer meaning on the conflict that produced it. The value of crisis for Scott’s narrative system was derived from *Kairos* not simply as effect, but as lived experience; some moments make historical processes clear and meaningful, precisely because they are irreversible. In *A Tale*, crisis appears in the form of *Kairos*, but it lacks its clarifying force. Crisis no longer appears irreversible, which is to say, it no longer represents a true ending. In other words, it takes on the character of the cliffhanger.

**CRISIS WITHOUT END**

Cliffhangers exploit the gravitational pull of crisis. They concretize Reinhart Koselleck’s sense of crisis as “cut” by performing an incision in the text itself, lending the conceptual break a real material presence in the book or magazine in the reader’s hands.\(^1\)\(^1\)\(^7\) The cliffhanger uses the bibliographic convention of the chapter break to signal a point of no return in the story, reducing far-ranging narrative possibilities to a brute binary: life or death, success or failure, right or wrong.

But at the same time, the cliffhanger derives its power from posing crisis as a question. Are we sure, the cliffhanger asks, that what appears immanent is really the moment of change, of reversal, of revelation? The cliffhanger always holds out the possibility that what appears certain and imminent is only a trick – an effect of discursive framing that will disappear as we read on. And this combination is what makes the device so appealing to Dickens. The cliffhanger derives force from the finality of a narrative *or*, while retaining the possibility of *and*. It is, in this regard, a fitting narrative form for the novel’s ideology of history.

Some cliffhangers embrace the logic of *and* more than others, none more so than what I have called the “inconsistent” cliffhanger. In my introduction, I argued that inconsistent cliffhangers frame instabilities that prove to be chimerical. For example, late in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Little Nell walks along the street of a busy town, seeking charity. She approaches a fellow traveler with a hopeful glance, but when he turns to look at her, she utters a “wild shriek” and falls senseless at his feet.\(^1\)\(^8\) The chapter (and weekly serial number) breaks off here, leaving us to worry that Quilp or some other unsympathetic figure has tracked her down at last. But when the next chapter begins, we immediately learn the traveler is none other than the friendly school master Nell encountered earlier in her journey. What looked like terror before the chapter break proves to be a happy surprise, in fact.

Without a doubt, Dickens was one of the more cunning practitioners of the inconsistent cliffhanger in the nineteenth century, and in *Great Expectations*, we saw him using the device with a softer touch. When, at Christmas dinner, Mrs. Jo rises from the table to fetch a pork pie

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\(^1\)\(^7\) As I noted in my introduction, Koselleck traces the concept of historical crisis to the cut: “Derived from *krinō*, to cut, to select, to decide, to judge; by extension, to measure, to quarrel, to fight – ‘crisis’ aimed at a definitive, irrevocable decision. The concept implied strict alternatives that permitted no further revision: success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, and finally, salvation or damnation.” See Koselleck, “Some Questions Regarding the Conceptual History of ‘Crisis’,” *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 237.

\(^1\)\(^8\) Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 343.
that, unbeknownst to her, Pip has already stolen and delivered to Magwitch, Pip is seized by terror. Knowing Mrs. Jo will soon discover the theft, Pip jumps up and rushes to the door to escape. But just as he reaches the door, he is greeted by a band of soldiers bearing handcuffs. The leader of the band of soldiers holds out the cuffs to Pip and says “Here you are, look sharp, come on!” The chapter and weekly number end here, with the soldier’s direct interpellation (“Here you are”) seemingly confirming Pip’s guilt. But as soon as the next number resumes, we learn that the soldiers are in fact looking for Jo, the blacksmith, to assist with the cuffs they were brandishing in Pip’s face a moment before. What seemed to be a crisis – Pip’s imminent arrest for the theft of the pie – turns out to be something else. Yet all the same, the tension highlighted by the cliffhanger – Pip’s guilt, his sense that he has run afoul of the law – in fact has great import for the novel as a whole. The inconsistent cliffhanger thus draws an important thematic issue into focus, materializing Pip’s sense of guilt as a social fact even as it retroactively cancels its occurrence in the story. The power of this moment thus depends on its embrace of a kind of both/and logic. The novel uses the cliffhanger to impress upon the reader the paradoxical way in which Pip both is and is not guilty.

In both of these examples, the placement of the discursive break accentuates a sense of narrative irresolution. In each case, the discursive stop feels premature because the event represented is unresolved, which in turn creates the impression that a crisis is imminent. But as soon as we read on, the tension evaporates: Pip is not, in fact, under arrest; Nell has not been discovered by Quilp. What looked like a crisis was only the effect of a discursive arrangement. Remove the discursive break, and the reader’s understanding of the narrative progression looks entirely different. To put it another way, Dickens’s manipulation of Chronos (in the form of discourse time) allows him to generate a sense of Kairos – a moment of dramatic change in the story – that is subsequently revealed to be no such thing. In this sense, we might say that the and logic of the inconsistent cliffhanger derives from a kind of artificial construction of Kairos, a sense of Kairos wrought entirely from Chronos. What we thought was a crisis turns out only to have been a misinterpretation of some banal event, some nonevent.

But in A Tale, Chronos is nonetheless dominated by Kairos, and this is reflected in the unique form of the novel’s most complex cliffhanger. In a telling move, A Tale inverts the normal form of the inconsistent cliffhanger, retaining its inconsistency but reversing the mechanism. Where the device normally relies on a premature discursive stop to create an impression of crisis, here we find the opposite. Instead of ending a chapter on an unresolved event in the story, here Dickens feints at a premature resolution. The problem isn’t that the discourse cuts off with story left to tell, but that the story seems to have concluded with pages still to fill. The narrative itself seems to have ended too soon. As a result, Kairos is compromised in a more fundamental way; the decisive moment comes and goes, but its effects prove fleeting. Where inconsistent cliffhangers usually seize upon the appearance of a pivotal moment to propel the story towards resolution, here the possibility of narrative resolution itself is thrown into doubt; things appear over and done with, and yet this sense of resolution cannot guarantee finality. Rather than tease the reader by denying them a particular end, the inconsistent cliffhanger in A Tale puts the very existence of endings into question.

The moment occurs after Charles Darnay is exonerated by the Revolutionary Tribunal for fleeing France, thanks to the testimony of Dr. Manette. A political prisoner held in the Bastille for eighteen years because of a lettre de cachet, Dr. Manette now finds himself greeted as a hero in Revolutionary Paris – a walking symbol of the overthrow of the ancien regime. This public

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reception works to Darnay’s advantage when Dr. Manette testifies on his behalf. Speaking with “the straightforward force of truth and earnestness,” Dr. Manette is eloquent enough that “the Jury and the populace became one,” and Darnay is immediately freed (295). Following the trial, private and public resolution are integrated, as Darnay’s official, public exoneration leads to a scene of domestic harmony: the family returns to a Paris apartment where, mindful of their good fortune, they all “reverently bowed their heads and hearts” to thank God for his mercy (297). Darnay directs Lucie to thank her father for saving him, for “No other man in all this France could have done what he has done for me” (297). And as Lucie lays her head upon her father’s breast, the narrator sounds a note of welcome respite, observing that Dr. Manette “was happy in the return he had made her, he was recompensed for his suffering, he was proud of his strength. As Lucie sobs, overcome by the emotions of the day, her father gently remonstrates her, “You must not be weak, my darling…don’t tremble so. I have saved him”’ (297). On this solemn note, the chapter ends.

The scene is not framed as a brief interval of harmony, like the days of tentative domestic calm at the Manette residence in London. No, when Dr. Manette declares that he has saved Darnay, in a chapter titled “Triumph,” no less, true narrative resolution seems to have arrived. Darnay and Lucie are now reunited, bringing the romance plot to a close. And alongside this romantic closure there is a kind of psychological victory for Dr. Manette, who has suffered throughout the novel from the traumatic memories of his imprisonment. Now he is “recompensed for his suffering” and “proud of his strength.” Injustice is transformed into justice, as Dr. Manette’s captivity is recuperated as the very means of freeing his son-in-law.

And the turn to justice is not confined to the personal and familial spheres. Recall that at this point in the novel Darnay has been under arrest and imprisoned in Paris for more than a year. During that time Lucie has regularly visited the street outside his cell on the off chance that he might catch a glimpse of her. These regular visits bring Lucie into contact with several representatives of the Terror – the woodsawyer who refers to himself as “the Samson of the firewood guillotine,” while gleefully lopping billets of wood into his basket, and the Revolutionary mob dancing the Carmagnole “like five thousand demons” (287, 288). These meetings are reminiscent of Scott, with the protagonist coming into direct contact with the imaginary collective agent of Revolutionary history – the People. With the end of the trial, a measure of accommodation between individual and collective is suggested, for “the Jury and the populace became one.” Darnay is released, and the “wild dreamlike procession” of the

120 “Samson” is likely an anglicization of Sanson, the name of the state-appointed executioner who was entrusted with operating the guillotine during the Revolution. For a sensitive reading of Sanson’s role in both the politics and the spectacle of the guillotine, see Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, trans. Christopher Miller (London: Lane, 1989).

121 Of course, Dickens’s actual depiction of the People as blood-thirsty and irredeemably demonic is quite unlike what we generally find in Scott. The urban mobs of the Porteous Riot in *The Heart of Midlothian* may be destructive, but the narrator sympathetically draws out the logic of the riot’s ignition and development. Likewise, the partisan religious strife of *Old Mortality* is not simply the spontaneous impulse of collective madness, but a legitimate grievance recklessly stoked into hysteria by fanatical figures like Habukkuk Mucklewrath. By contrast, A *Tale*’s depiction of mob violence is characteristic of what Patrick Brantlinger calls Dickens’s characteristic wariness of “grotesque populism,” the belief that “the democratic ideal of the sovereignty of the people may only be the ultimate nightmare, not history’s cunning so much as its surrealism. The people have been so badly misruled throughout history, and are so badly misruled in the present, that their only possible responses are either acquiescence in their continued exploitation or, what for Dickens is sure to be worse, the mob violence of revolution.” See Brantlinger, “Did Dickens Have a Philosophy of History?” in *Dickens Studies Annual* 30 (2001), 66.
Carmagnole transforms from a grotesque dance (“something once innocent delivered over to all devilry”), into a celebration of the Goddess of Liberty, “swelling and overflowing out into the adjacent streets” and “[absorbing] them every one and [whirling] them away,” (296, 289, 297). Certainly, one cannot fail to hear a note of uneasiness in the depiction of the crowd absorbing everyone in its path, and the momentum of collective action threatening to override individual sovereignty. But nevertheless, at the very least the crowd takes its impulse from Darnay’s acquittal. His freedom becomes symbolically universalized in the procession of the Goddess of Liberty, and the fates of the novel’s protagonists – Lucie, Darnay, and Dr. Manette – appear to be resolved within the horizon of public history under the sign of the Revolution’s first virtue, liberté.

But the next chapter begins with a foreboding repetition that casts doubt on this resolution:

“I have saved him.’ It was not another of the dreams in which he had often come back; he was really here. And yet his wife trembled, and a vague but heavy fear was upon her.

All the air around was so thick and dark, the people were so passionately revengeful and fitful, the innocent were so constantly put to death on vague suspicion and black malice, it was so impossible to forget that many as blameless as her husband as dear to others as he was to her, every day shared the fate from which he had been clutched, that her heart could not be as lightened of its load as she felt it out to be. The shadows of the wintry afternoon were beginning to fall, and even now the dreadful carts were rolling through the streets. Her mind pursued them, looking for him among the Condemned; and then she clung closer to his real presence and trembled more” (298).

Carried across the chapter break, Dr. Manette’s triumphant “I have saved him” is hollowed out, undercut. (A pertinent, if esoteric, question: are we to take the second instance of “I have saved him” as a unique utterance in the diegesis, or a repetition by the narrator? Is it a discursive repetition of a single narrative event, or does Dr. Manette actually tell Lucie that he has saved Darnay twice?) In a masterful turn, the narrator stresses the reality of Dr. Manette’s statement – “It was not another of the dreams…he was really here” – while simultaneously suggesting that this reality is, in a sense, not enough. The larger historical process remains unchecked, and the momentum of the crowd may easily drift from a celebration of innocence to renewed calls for retribution. Where the last chapter discovered a tentative balance between public and private fates in the people’s wish to see Darnay returned safely to his family, here the narrator foreshadows the darker side of populist justice, for the individual remains dangerously subordinate to the will of the collective. Insofar as Darnay’s acquittal depends on the judgment of the people, his happy fate cannot comfort Lucie, for “many as blameless as her husband…every day shared the fate from which he had been clutched.” This is a remarkable articulation of the Revolutionary social imagination. Darnay’s actual reprieve is compromised, in Lucie’s eyes, because it represents an exception, and therefore fails to offer wider absolution. And because Darnay’s individual fate cannot be generalized – because it is the result of Dr. Manette’s personal testimony, and is therefore ungeneralizable by definition – Lucie cannot help but regard it as impermanent. Despite his acquittal, Darnay is not innocent in any meaningful sense, for he (like so many others) remains subject to the will of the People, itself prone to fits and provocations. And Lucie’s fears will, of course, prove correct.
The discursive break between the two instances of “I have saved him” is an inconsistent cliffhanger, but it is inverted, flipped inside out. Instead of using the discursive cut to produce the impression of a crisis that will be retroactively retracted, here the cut falls on what appears to be a moment of resolution – a natural end to the struggles of Darnay and Lucie within the horizon of the Revolution. The end has simply come too soon, in a technical sense. The discourse signals as much, with the apparent resolution of “I have saved him,” immediately succeeded by an ominous “KNOCK AT THE DOOR” in capital letters – the title of the next chapter. Dickens’s serial readers would therefore have been unlikely to believe Dr. Manette’s claim. But what is unique about this resolution is that it seems to work – it does, in fact, offer legitimate narrative resolution, on multiple fronts. The effect is unsettling. It is now resolution, not crisis, that produces apprehension. In this respect, Dickens anticipates a prototypical feature

122 In Dickens, cliffhangers generally involve doors. A review of every chapter and serial ending in Dickens’s novels reveals that doors factor into more than 30 of Dickens’s cliffhangers, or about 40% of the total I have identified. There are other cliffhanger tropes that occur with some frequency, including fainting or falling senseless (which happens eight times) and revelations presented in dialogue without narratorial commentary (six times), but doors significantly outnumber these.
of the horror film – the relief that arrives too soon. After escaping from the killer’s pursuit, the naïve victim exhales, thinking she is now safe. But it is a false sense of safety, and we know it is false simply because it comes too soon in the narrative discourse. The killer is still out there, and what looks like resolution is anything but.

What is an end that arrives too soon? We might broach the question with help from the rich tradition of narrative theory. Since Aristotle, philosophers, theorists, and critics have offered abundant commentary on the function of the story’s end – how it works, what it is meant to do, and what distinguishes it from other key aspects of narrative. In his Poetics, Aristotle offers a straightforward, but surprisingly challenging definition, observing that an end is that which “naturally comes after something else...but itself has nothing after it.”  

Boris Tomashevksy takes up this idea but shifts focus to the reader’s state of mind, arguing that “at the end of the story all the conflicts are reconciled and the interests harmonized...[This] harmonious situation, which does not require further development, will neither evoke nor arouse the reader’s anticipation. That is why the condition at the end of a work is so static. This static condition is called the ending.” And Tomashevsky’s sense of the ending as a situation incapable of arousing anticipation reappears in D.A. Miller’s notion of the “nonnarratable,” which he defines as a state of affairs inaugurated by the ending – a state defined by its “incapacity to generate a story.” In Miller’s account, the nonnarratable often takes the form of marriage or death, states that seem to foreclose the possibility of narrative complication or development, and therefore necessarily comply with both Tomashevsky and Aristotle’s sense of an ending as that which “has nothing after it.”

Nothing, stasis, death; in theory, this is what the end looks like. As Thomas Laqueur puts it, “To be dead is for the story to be over.” But there are important qualifications; as Peter Brooks reminds us, death on its own is not quite enough. For a story to end properly, it must find “the right death, the correct end.” By this Brooks means that the end must arrive at the right time, and above all, not before its time. An ending that comes too soon “short-circuits” the narrative, the threat of which looms over every story. This is “the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death...The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative” (104). Despite all he shares with Aristotle, Tomashevsky, and Miller, Brooks’ notion of the end as dependent on the duration it affords represents an important twist on that line of thought. In his eyes, a good ending is not simply one that delivers reader and protagonist to a static, nonnarratable state, but one that, in addition, takes a certain amount of time to arrive. If the good ending, like the right death, is the one that arrives after an appropriate duration, this is because in Brooks’ eyes a narrative must ultimately yield something like the illusion of mastery over death, for both

126 This, or marriage.
protagonist and reader. Death is always the end of the story, but our capacity to prolong that story long enough to reach a particular death grants a sense of control that reconciles us to the inevitable. Plot, Brooks’s line of thinking goes, is the means by which we accommodate ourselves to death by imagining that we choose it.

And though he does not mention it, the sheer existence of cliffhangers lends weight to Brooks’s argument, for the cliffhanger-ending might well be described as the one that does not arrive at its appointed time, and thus forces death – and emphatically the wrong death – upon us. Cliffhangers threaten to short-circuit the hero’s journey precisely as Brooks suggests. They disclose the wrong ending – the abrupt or unsatisfying resolution, or the conclusion that fails to complete the hero’s journey. And it is the imminence of the wrong death or short-circuited narrative that makes cliffhangers frustrating. Which is also to say, effective. They threaten to undo narrative’s most vital work by suggesting that in spite of our plotting and preparation, we cannot choose our death. We cannot dictate the terms of our own ending, try as we might.

In this regard, the cliffhanger in its classic form represents an exemplary instance of what Frank Kermode calls “peripeteia,” a term he develops from Aristotle. What Brooks refers to as the middle (or “arabesque” of plot), Kermode calls peripeteia, a figure that he defines in relation to the “naïve apocalyptism.” For Kermode, apocalyptism is an old (but persistent) way of grappling with the chaos and discontinuity of life. Imagining an absolute end to the world helps people make sense of happenings by imposing a temporal orientation onto the world itself. This gives actions and events a direction; it puts now in relation to a definite end, and allows us to interpret everything in between as either significant or insignificant insofar as it succeeds or fails in advancing towards that end.

But narratives that lean too heavily towards apocalyptism look like myths, because only those events that facilitate (or directly impede) a predetermined end bear inclusion in the story. As a result, the mass of confusion that constitutes much of life goes uncounted. The hesitations, foiled expectations, and false turns of more complex narrative forms (like novels) have no place, for such features ironize the relation between now and then, and declare the apocalyptic

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130 Kermode’s claim that narrative gives the world an orientation is best understood in terms of E.M. Forster’s famous remark on the difference between story and plot. Forster writes, ‘‘The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief,’ is a plot.’’ The first phrase indicates a succession of two events, the second indicates a succession along with a casual relation. Yet causal relations placed in succession do not always produce plot, in Forster’s sense of the term. For example, when the executioner releases the guillotine’s blade, gravity causes the blade to drop, and the force of this drop results in the death of the victim. There is, then, a causal relation between the executioner’s act and the victim’s death, but articulating this relation does not so much constitute a plot as a description or explanation of a process. The type of causality Forster identifies – what we might think of as a uniquely narrative causality – is of a different sort. In Forster’s example, the queen’s death does not illustrate any natural law about the relation between one death and another, or about the relation between kings and queens in general. There is no inherent causal relationship between the two events. And yet, by saying that the queen dies of grief, we understand these two events to be related just as surely as gravity relates the executioner’s act to the death of the condemned. Narrative causality, as opposed to other types of causality, puts isolated events in relation to one another, asserting relations that do not otherwise inhere. There is no reason that the queen’s death must follow the king’s; only the plot establishes this relationship. In the process, plot extends the relevance of the king’s death, by asserting that it causes the queen’s death. The significance of the king’s death is thus not exhausted in its occurrence; it exerts pressure elsewhere in the world. It is therefore an event that has, in Kermode’s sense, an orientation. See E.M. Forster Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 130.
progression towards a known end simple and straightforward – or even worse, unrealistic.\textsuperscript{131} The apocalyptic imagination produces bare narratives that proceed without hesitation from beginning to end – narratives that, like prophecies or conspiracy theories, see the end everywhere.

Kermode thus identifies the development of peripeteia as a crucial turning point in the history of narrative. He takes the term from Aristotle, for whom it represents a sudden shift in circumstances: Oedipus realizing he himself is the man responsible for the plague in Thebes, and that he must therefore suffer the very punishment he has prescribed.\textsuperscript{132} Kermode develops Aristotle’s notion of the shift by extending it to encompass all the forms of misdirection, wandering, or detour that disrupt or resist the straightforward movement of a story towards its end.

But this is not to say that peripeteia resists the end itself. Rather, peripeteia represents a “disconfirmation followed by a consonance.”\textsuperscript{133} The end is warded off only to return by some other means, because our interest in having our expectations falsified “is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route.”\textsuperscript{134} In other words, it is not a distrust of endings or a reluctance to reach them that motivates the delay of peripeteia, but the need to satisfy our skepticism concerning what apocalyptic thinking presents as the unidirectionality of time, the sense that all things lead inevitably to a predetermined end. Peripeteia does not arise because people have lost faith in the existence or importance of endings, but rather, they gradually grow more skeptical about how they might arrive. Life is simply too messy for a clear movement from beginning to end to seem plausible, and as a result, stories that “short-circuit,” as Brooks puts it – that present this movement without digression or complication – do not work, in the sense that they do not help us make sense of our lives.

Peripeteia is thus a crucial development in the history of narrative form because it allows us to register time itself as a problematic feature of life.\textsuperscript{135} At the same time, peripeteia preserves something of the older, apocalyptic sense of the ending, albeit in a more modern guise. Kermode writes, “the more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that [the narrative work] respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something \textit{real}” (18). If apocalyptic thinking gives time direction by orienting the world towards a pre-determined end, then peripeteia begins to secularize the end by granting us the means to regard it as contingent – the result of choice and happenstance, and not

\textsuperscript{131} In this sense, Kermode’s brief sketch of the historical development of narrative forms approximately echoes the evolution described by Eric Auerbach in the famous opening chapter of \textit{Mimesis}. In “Odysseus’s Scar,” Auerbach argues that the narrative construction of suspense in the Hebraic epic discloses an understanding of the “real” that is neither present nor possible in the Homeric text. The new narrative effect (suspense) thus reflects a new social fact: the lived experience of historical time, i.e. the difference between past and future, understood as a new “reality.” See \textit{Mimesis} trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 2003): 3-23. On suspense, surprise, and curiosity as the three core narrative emotions, see Meir Steinberg “Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity” \textit{Poetics Today} 13.3 (1992): 463-541.

\textsuperscript{132} In \textit{The Poetics} Aristotle identifies peripeteia as the moment in a plot when circumstances suddenly go from good to bad. When accompanied with “anagnorisis,” or recognition, peripeteia achieves tragedy’s highest, most powerful effects.

\textsuperscript{133} Kermode, \textit{The Sense of an Ending}, 18.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{135} In this regard, Kermode’s notion of peripeteia dovetails with Lukács’s sense that among all literary forms, only the novel includes time as a constitutive principle. A key difference between Kermode and Lukács is that Kermode’s notion of peripeteia is a narrative one, and is not restricted to the novel. See \textit{The Theory of the Novel} trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 121.
the product of fate. Brooks’s notion of the “right end” – the chosen death – echoes this. Far from exposing the artificiality of ending, peripeteia’s misdirection becomes the very means by which we regain our confidence in its authenticity. “The image of the end can never by permanently falsified,” Kermode writes, but, “when awake and sane, [people] feel the need to show a marked respect for things as they are; so that there is a recurring need for adjustments in the interest of reality as well as of control” (17). If, in Brooks’s eyes, the well-plotted end grants us the fiction of control over death, for Kermode, peripeteia represents the opposite – a sort of concession to the unpredictability of reality.

What is remarkable about Dickens’s inverted cliffhanger is that, by relocating the moment of narrative resolution in the discourse, he recommissions the function of resolution as a form of peripeteia. Because resolution comes too soon, with a knock at the door sure to come, the work of ending is repurposed as something ominous, a sign of greater strife looming on the horizon. Darnay’s exoneration and release, which might have resolved the family plot in the midst of the Terror, now acts as a red herring, a snare designed to demonstrate just how determined Madame Defarge really is.

This transformation of resolution into peripeteia is the heir of the momentaneous cliffhanger I analyzed in Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*. It presents the possibility of personal and political resolution in order to concentrate the sense of change that the plot produces. And yet, viewed from the perspective of Scott’s historical fiction more generally, there is something brutal about the way Dickens’s inverted cliffhanger undermines narrative resolution. It represents the narrative logic of *and* taken to its pessimistic extreme, and encapsulates the transformation of crisis in the movement from Scott’s to Dickens’s historical vision. For crisis no longer seems even to represent a fruitful site for historiographical inquiry, a place where the historian might step forward and authenticate the scene, as in *The Bride*. In Dickens, the form of resolution that crisis affords cannot put historical sequences to rest in any significant way. With the inverted cliffhanger, what is gained through ending does not last. The resolution it offers is drained of meaning.

But if the novel will not locate an end to a bloody historical process, what can it offer in its stead? What can a historical novel about the Revolution do, if it cannot imagine its end?

### AFTERWARDS

The difficulty of imagining an end to a story about the Revolution is endemic to the historical material itself. How, after all, did the Revolution end? To answer this question, one must first of all say what the Revolution was. And saying what the Revolution was immediately unveils what appears to be a simple historical question as, in fact, a deeply ideological one. As Slavoj Žižek argues, three essentially incommensurate interpretations of the Revolution persist, each running along ideological fault-lines familiar in our politics today. There is the conservative rejection of the Revolution, in the tradition of Edmund Burke. This school regards the Revolution as indistinguishable from the Terror – a quasi-divine judgment against the mob’s misguided overthrow of the natural order of things. Next is the liberal yearning for a “Revolution without Revolution” that embraces certain advances of the Revolution (the abolition of the monarchy, the partial extension of the franchise, etc.), but disowns the Terror. By this view, the

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136 This is fitting, of course, as the very word “ideology” was coined during the Revolution.
Terror is the point at which everything goes wrong, and must therefore be distinguished from the Revolution proper. Finally there is the radical Leftist position, which, rather than disown the Terror, regards it as an unfortunate but necessary defense of the Revolution from its enemies. Rather than seeking to separate Terror from Revolution, as the liberals do, Žižek’s Left sees the two as necessarily related. Žižek quotes Saint-Just to sum up this position: “That which produces the general good is always terrible.”\(^{137}\)

Each of these interpretations asserts that the Revolution ended at a different point, in a different way. This is not surprising, for as Brooks and Kermode have both shown, endings are ultimately interpretive gestures – they reveal something about the sequence of events they resolve (or fail to resolve). For example, to the conservative mind, the Revolution effectively begins and ends with the death of the king and the abolition of the monarchy. The perpetrators were “blasphemous” “monsters,” engaged in a “feast of blood – the triumph of guilt over innocence – the unhallowed orgies of demons, to which none but the greatest criminals were admitted, and over whom the most cruel, perfidious, and remorseless villain [Robespierre] that ever disgraced human form, was deemed qualified to preside.”\(^{138}\) Regicide and Terror are of a piece, and the latter is essentially understood as the consequence of the former, itself a fatal mistake.

For the liberal historian, the Revolution does not end with the abolition of the monarchy. It lasts longer, but ends catastrophically. For the liberal, the Revolution achieved real political advances (like the formation of the National Assembly), but by the time Terror was declared the order of the day, things had gone astray, and France needed to be rescued from itself. The Terror was a nightmare orchestrated by ideologues, and it was only when the dictatorial rule of these bad actors came to an end that things could finally settle down. Following the fall of Robespierre tensions subsided, and the gains of the Revolution could be seen for what they really were – a loosening of the noble and clerical stranglehold on governance that distributed political power more equitably.

But for the radical Left, the story of the Revolution has not ended yet. The fall of Robespierre did not constitute an end to the Terror, so much as a diversion of the Revolution’s underlying social project – a concerted movement away from fundamental principles and towards corrupt interests. As Alain Badiou writes, the reaction against Robespierre “opens a sequence wherein constitutional repression is backed up by an anti-popular vision of the State. It is not so much a question of ending the terror exerted over adversaries as of bringing about a radical shift in the source and target of that terror. From now on its source is the State constituted by rich, eligible voters; while its target is every will constituted or assembled on the basis of a popular declaration.”\(^{139}\) Central to Badiou’s stance is the observation that the repressive measures of the Terror were not monopolized by Jacobin ideologues. In fact, terror served centrist and conservative interests just as well. As David Andres points out, the bloodiest days of the Terror actually followed the arrest of Robespierre. The day after Robespierre’s execution, “the guillotine was the busiest it had ever been in Paris, dispatching no fewer than seventy-one members of the Robespierrist hierarchy of the capital.”\(^{140}\) Jacobinism has become a byword for the excesses of state terror, but in the aftermath of Robespierre’s arrest it was the Gilded Youth –

young reactionary men who wore dandyish costumes and affected aristocratic mien – who were responsible for the general atmosphere of fear. The Gilded Youth openly incited violence in public spaces, smashed windows at the Jacobin club, and whipped women from the galleries.\textsuperscript{141} By 1795 their anthem, \textit{Le Réveil du peuple} (‘the awakening of the people’), had become more ubiquitous than the \textit{Marseillaise}, and its lyrics hardly exemplify the moderate liberal values often associated with the end of the Terror:

Why this barbarous slowness? Hasten yourselves, sovereign people, to send all these blood-drinkers to the gates of Hell! War on all the agents of crime! Let us pursue them to their deaths! Share the horror that animates me, they shall not escape us. See already how they tremble, they dare not flee, the rogues! The traces of blood they vomit up will show us their steps. Yes we swear on your tomb, by our unfortunate land, to make a blood sacrifice of these frightful cannibals!\textsuperscript{142}

Badiou dubs the liberal school of thought that regards Robespierre’s fall as an overdue corrective to Jacobin excess “Thermidorean,” after the reactionary plot to overthrow the Jacobin hierarchy that took place on 9 Thermidor.\textsuperscript{143} For Badiou, the revisionist historian François Furet is a Thermidorean, because in his \textit{Penser la Révolution Française} (1978), Furet declares that the Revolution is over. For Badiou, much more than a simple matter of dating is at stake in this declaration, for by this Furet means that the twentieth-century experience of communism has emptied out revolutionary ideology, such that we can no longer look back to the Revolution as the beginning of an as-yet-unfinished project of emancipation. For Furet, the horrors of twentieth-century communism had their roots in the Revolutionary ideology of the Terror. The indisputable failure of communism, then, represented a permanent conclusion not simply to the sequence of events initiated by the Revolution, but more importantly to the horizon of expectations opened by the \textit{idea} of the French Revolution. The failure of communism means we can no longer regard the French Revolution as the beginning of a process still struggling towards its end; instead, it is a closed sequence, a series of events that has reached its conclusion.\textsuperscript{144}

But for the Left, the overthrow of Robespierre was not a merciful conclusion to a bloody process that had gone on too long. Rather, it was an interruption, a premature stop, a cliffhanger. A comment made by the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai encapsulates this view. Asked in 1953 what he thought of the French Revolution, Enlai responded, “It is still too early to tell.”\textsuperscript{145} An apparently simple narrative question – how does it end? – is thus loaded with ideological significance. And this is not simply a problem that has emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution, but one that was of enormous significance in the 1790s. Robespierre, in his last speech to the Convention (the day before his arrest), declared that without pure ends (by which he meant “the generous ambition to establish here on earth the world’s first Republic”), “a great revolution is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime.”\textsuperscript{146}

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\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 350-353.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 357. The tomb referred to here is Louis XVI’s.
\textsuperscript{143} See “What is a Thermidorean?” 124-140.
\textsuperscript{144} For an excellent discussion of Furet and Badiou’s opposing stances on the Revolution and Terror, see Sanja Perovic, “No Future or Still in Year One? Revisionist versus Lyricist Approaches to the French Revolution,” in \textit{Poetics Today} 37.2 (June 2016): 249-268.
\textsuperscript{145} Cited in Žižek, “Robespierre,” viii.
\textsuperscript{146} Maximilien Robespierre \textit{Virtue and Terror} (New York: Verso, 2007), 129.
Readers of *A Tale* will likely recognize Robespierre’s concern, for this is essentially how Dickens paints the Revolution: a crime that follows another crime by adopting its inhumanity. The worst acts of the Terror mirror the injustices of the *ancien regime*. Thus the Marquis of Evrémonde’s carriage, which early in the novel runs over a hungry boy in the middle of Paris, transforms by the end of the novel into the tumbril transporting the condemned to the guillotine: “Change these [tumbrils] back again to what they were, though powerful enchanter, Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilets of flaring Jezebels, the churches that are not my father’s house but dens of thieves, the huts of millions of starving peasants!” (385). There is no sense of progress on offer here. And many of the forms of emancipation that appear throughout the novel are strikingly grotesque – more in the vein of the orgy of the carmagnole, than the rights of man. From the beginning, Madame Defarge knits only the names of those who have sinned against the people; she is not interested in the principles upon which a new Republic might be founded. And while the novel is clearly sympathetic to the plight of the poor French, the historical allegory that emerges is ultimately most concerned with cautioning against the possibility of a repetition. In this regard, the moral judgment levied by the narrator rests on the exact sense of the Revolution that Robespierre cautioned against – a crime that replaces another crime: “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 ever again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.”

On its face, *A Tale* evades the historiographical difficulty presented by trying to identify an end to the Revolution. After all, we do not find such an end in *A Tale*. The novel resolves the Revolution only allegorically, offering the twin deaths of Madame Defarge and Sydney Carton as representative of the Revolution’s moral yield. But in another sense, the end of the Revolution is in fact the novel’s underlying object, insofar as an anxiety about the function of endings pervades the novel. If, on its face, *A Tale* has little to say about how the Revolution itself might reach its end, it does provide ways to think about the question in other guises. As J.M. Rignall argues, there is “a transparent relationship between narrative form and historical vision” in the novel (157). For Rignall, the historical vision on display in *A Tale* is not grounded in an interpretation of the Revolution itself, but rather in Dickens’s philosophy of historical processes, in which “oppression is shown to breed oppression, violence to beget violence, evil to provoke evil” – a process Rignall terms “the catastrophic continuum” (157). In other words, crises without ends. This is why we find endings that fail to provide resolution or completion everywhere in *A Tale*, endings that don’t quite work. For Dickens, the continuum of history has been emptied of any notion of progress, and thus has no end, no destination. For its course to change, then, it requires an intervention from without – Carton’s Christ-like sacrifice. The idea of revolution as a circle or cycle is key here; there is no possibility of resolution within the pattern of retribution that spurs the transition from *ancien regime* to Revolutionary Republic. It is a crime that destroys another crime.

The anxiety of ending takes two forms in the novel. On the one hand, we find a kind of fanatical faith in the capacity of the end to resolve. We see this most clearly in Madame Defarge’s radical embrace of absolute finality, her sense of death as supreme ethical obligation.

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147 As J.M. Rignall writes, *A Tale* is “dominated, even haunted, by its ending.” It is “an end-determined narrative whose individual elements are ordered by an ending which is both their goal and, in a sense, their source.” See Ringall, “Dickens and the Catastrophic Continuum of History in *A Tale of Two Cities*,” *Critical Essays on Charles Dickens’s* *A Tale of Two Cities* ed. by Michael A. Cotsell (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1998), 157.
We might think of Madame Defarge’s drive for the end as a version of Kermode’s apocalyptism—a belief in the end as a pre-determined destination that one must tirelessly work towards. For Madame Defarge, the end exerts an unmistakable attraction, a kind of gravitational pull. Early on, for example, after learning that Charles Darnay is to marry Lucie Manette, Madame Defarge’s husband Ernest expresses the hope that Destiny will keep Darnay from returning to France, for Lucie’s sake. But Madame Defarge counters that Destiny “will take him where he is to go, and will lead him to the end that is to end him” (191). One may argue that there is a note of ambivalence here—a hint of *que sera sera*—but in fact Madame Defarge means just the opposite. She knows exactly what Darnay’s end is, and makes it her duty to stay vigilant, in order to catch the opportunity to effect that ending. In this regard, Madame Defarge’s element is *Kairos*: she looks to her moment. Defending her desire to see not only Charles Darnay, but his entire family eradicated, she declares “Tell the Wind and the Fire where to stop; not me!” (354). Her vivid characterization (she is certainly the most memorable character in the novel) is ironically achieved through her staunch commitment to her narrative “function,” in Vladimir Propp’s sense—her role, first and foremost, as a means by which the story achieves its end. This unwavering pursuit of the end results in a disturbing immobility, as she is repeatedly set off from the tumultuous multitudes that congregate around her. After the storming of the Bastille, for example, the Marquis de Launay (the Governor of the prison) is marched to the Hôtel de Ville for judgment, and

“In the howling universe of passion and contention that seemed to encompass this grim old officer conspicuous in his grey coat and red decoration, there was but one quite steady figure, and that was a woman’s…She stood immovable close to the grim old officer, and remained immovable close to him; remained immovable close to him through the streets, as Defarge and the rest bore him along; remained immovable close to him when he was got near his destination, and began to be struck at from behind; remained immovable close to him when the long-gathering rain of stabs and blows fell heavy; was so close to him when dropped dead under it, that suddenly animated, she put her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife—long ready—hewed off his head” (228-9).

Madame Defarge is pure drive—a settler of accounts disturbingly devoid of desire. The image of her steady, immovable figure underlines her fixation on violent revolt. But it is important to note that the way Dickens handles Madame Defarge’s story bears directly on the novel’s representation of the experience of historical crisis. At this point in the novel, when she hews off the head of the Marquis de Launay, the reader does not yet know about Madame

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148 On character functions, see Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968): 25-65. Daniel Stout draws attention to the way Madame Defarge, knitting the names and physical characteristics of her victims, “doesn’t care to—and, in a strict sense, cannot—make any appeal to an individual’s inner life. For her external descriptions do not provide an outline to be filled in by a description of internal psychology. They are as much character as this Revolutionary world needs.” See Stout, “Nothing Personal: The Decapitation of Character in *A Tale of Two Cities*,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43.2 (2010), 36-37. In this respect, Madame Defarge finds a comic, inverted double in Jarvis Lorry. Lorry insists upon being regarded as the mere a functionality for Tellson’s bank—everything he does is simply “a matter of business”—yet his imaginative impulses and moral sensibilities are perhaps the richest of anyone in the novel (27). The narrator describes Lorry’s mental states more precisely than anyone else’s, including even Dr. Manette, whose traumatic repetitions remain necessarily opaque. As he waits for Lucie to arrive in Dover, Lorry’s “thoughts seemed to cloud” for “his mind was busily digging, digging, digging, in the live red coals,” and later, when Lucie arrives, “a sudden vivid likeness passed before him…like a breath along the surface of the gaunt pier-glass behind her” (22-3).
Defarge’s tragic family history. As a result, when she beheads de Launay, her act seems, in a sense, general – less the singular response to personalized brutality, than an expression of shared will, a collective revolt against the wretched conditions she shares with all the other hungry Parisians we have seen in Saint Antoine thus far. Madame Defarge thus functions, for much of the novel, as a personification of the more abstract, general desire for revenge.

But as the novel moves to its final act and Madame Defarge’s family history is revealed (read publicly from Doctor Manette’s manuscript during Charles Darnay’s third trial), the meaning of her drive for the end changes. What had looked like the expression of general will turns out to be a more resolutely personal desire for vengeance. And Madame Defarge is so entirely defined by this particular end – not the overthrow of Louis XVI or the declaration of the rights of man, but the extermination of the Evrémonde family line – that she seems to absorb the very historical process she is participating in. For Madame Defarge, the Revolution itself – the defining historical problem of the nineteenth century – functions primarily as a means to avenge the crimes perpetrated against her family.

This is a very distinct way of handling the relationship between public events and private desires. In Scott, such a personal stake in a developing public crisis would invest that crisis with tangible significance. But at the same time, the public nature of the crisis would modify the personal aim in turn. Here, the two tracks struggle to become one. They oppress one another. The historical consequences of the Evrémonde’s violence and repression are made clear, but the scope of the Revolution never really expands beyond retribution for this particular crime and its analogues. The promise of a new political system, of a more equitable distribution of wealth and political power, of new forms of social organization – these never really appear in the novel, either as goals of the Revolution, or as ideals sacrificed to its baser impulses. The revolution becomes a means to achieve vengeance against Evrémondes everywhere, and that is all. Even as the Terror gains steam, Madame Defarge expresses no concern that what was once a just cause has since gone off track. Instead, her repeated calls for extermination and eradication – the drive for finality ratcheted to the extreme pitch of “extinction discourse” – only ring louder.

Dickens is clearly unsettled by Madame Defarge’s unwavering faith in the legitimacy of a particular end, which is why she meets the end that she does, smothered in Miss Pross’s thoroughly English embrace. In a letter to his friend Edward Bulwer Lytton, Dickens defends his handling of her death:

I am not clear, and I never have been clear, respecting that canon of fiction which forbids the interposition of accident in such a case as Madame Defarge’s death. Where the accident is inseparable from the passion and emotion of the character, where it is strictly consistent with the whole design, and arises out of some culminating proceeding on the part of the character which the whole story has led up to, it seems to me to become, as it were, an act of divine justice. And when I use Miss Pross (though this is quite another question) to bring about that catastrophe, I have the positive intention of making that half-comic intervention a part of the desperate woman’s failure, and of opposing that mean death – instead of a desperate one in the streets, which she wouldn’t have minded –

to the dignity of Carton’s wrong or right; this was the design, and seemed to be in the fineness of things.\textsuperscript{150}

She would have preferred death in the streets, at the hands of the revolutionary crowd. Such a death might have had resonance, recalling perhaps the executions of Danton, Desmoulins, Robespierre, or Saint-Just. But instead, Madame Defarge meets her end in an abrupt suicide, accidentally precipitated by Miss Pross. And as Dickens stresses here, it is important that Madame Defarge’s death is accidental. For her end to function properly, her will must be overturned. This is why she perishes in the “half-comic intervention” of Miss Pross’s embrace, rather than at the hands of the Revolutionary mob. Unlike Sydney Carton, Madame Defarge’s death is not the result of plot, intent, or desire, so much as desire gone awry, desire short-circuiting on itself. It is, in Brooks’s sense, meaningless – the accidental side-effect of a desire grown malignant. In contrast to Sydney Carton’s Christ-like surrender, which opens out to sustain a new community (the Darnay family, whose line he traces in his closing oration), Madame Defarge’s death is closed off from the future. Its only lasting mark is Miss Pross’s lingering deafness. A fitting legacy.

Opposite Madame Defarge’s discourse of absolute finality, \textit{A Tale} exhibits a very different anxiety about endings. This anxiety finds form in the surprisingly lively afterlife of death. Where Madame Defarge elevates death to the level of a kind of final solution, all around her the novel parades deaths that do not provide a conclusion. At the opening of the novel, Dr. Manette is recalled to life; later, we follow Jerry Cruncher as he resurrects corpses for dissection; and in between, Barsad fakes his death to smuggle himself to France. These episodes all depict death as something temporary – a trick, a business. Detached from its resolving narrative function, death in these cases does not represent the end of the story. Instead, the dead return in stubbornly material ways. Thus, as Jarvis Lorry dreams of digging Dr. Manette out of his grave: “dig, and dig, dig – now, with a spade, now with a great key, now with his hands – to dig this wretched creature out. Got out at last, with earth hanging about his face and hair, he would suddenly fall away to dust” (18). This materiality seems to suggest that the trouble with death, here, is that it does not really end things. The dead simply won’t go away.

This persistence should not be viewed as a variation on the unrelenting pursuit of the end we find in Madame Defarge, or as the manifestation of some drive that outlives its bodily host. It is not a case in which, as Slavoj Žižek puts it (following Lacan), “The return of the living dead […] materializes a certain symbolic debt persisting beyond physical expiration.”\textsuperscript{151} Quite the opposite. These are dead who do not want to return. Take Miss Pross’s brother, Barsad, who fakes his own death in England in order to escape notice and make his way to France, where he serves as a Royalist spy. Barsad is trying to die, in the sense that he is trying to bury his English social identity to facilitate his passage to France. (Thus, when Miss Pross recognizes him there he reacts “in a furtive, frightened way” [307].) To stage his death, Barsad holds a grand mock burial in London to satisfy the symbolic demands of the funeral rite, and convince the community that he is really dead. But in a wonderful twist, Barsad’s faked death fails not because the funeral rite was not performed correctly, but because it was. The funeral procession

\textsuperscript{150} Letter to Edward Bulwer Lytton, June 5th, 1860. \textit{The Letters of Charles Dickens}, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), Vol. IX, 259-60. Unfortunately Bulwer Lytton’s specific objections are lost, because in September 1860 Dickens burned all the letters he had received over the past twenty years.

leads Jerry Cruncher to believe a corpse has actually been buried, which in turn prompts his nighttime visit to the graveyard, where he discovers the body is missing. In a similar vein, though perhaps even more discomfiting, early in the novel when Jarvis Lorry imagines meeting Dr. Manette after his eighteen-year imprisonment, he asks him “I hope you care to live?” Manette replies, “I can’t say” (18). This ambivalence takes death as the opposite of the resolving function Madame Defarge attributes to it when she equates death with justice or vengeance. Death in this sense is unable to guarantee a loss – to put an end to a life, a social order, or a historical period.

This is the historico-narrative problem that A Tale works through. The novel presents the reader with, on the one hand, Madame Defarge’s monomaniacal sense of death as pure end, as the destination towards which all roads necessarily lead. On the other hand, the novel insists on death’s insufficiency as a guarantee of narrative resolution by displaying a host of deaths that do not really end things in any meaningful way. The assumptions underlying this opposition are the sense of death as biological state and death as social practice. For Madame Defarge, there is no sense in which Darnay and his family could meet the wrong death, because all that matters is that they physically die. This conception of death articulates a theory of narrative in which ends are located at the level of story, rather than discourse: if Darnay dies, his story will necessarily be over. But the novel insists on the alternative view. For so many other figures in the novel, death itself is not enough to end a story, because an end is not, at bottom, a physical state one finds in the world. It is instead a discursive operation – a social act that renders events useful for the surviving community. In this sense, it is possible to reach the wrong end, as Madame Defarge herself does when she dies the wrong way – not in the streets as she would have wished, but in her struggle with Miss Pross.

Does A Tale resolve the opposition between these two notions of death and narrative form? The novel famously ends with Sydney Carton’s selfless act of sacrifice; he stands in for his rival Charles Darnay, so that the family of the woman they both love may remain intact. In an obvious sense, Carton’s death is memorable because it is the wrong one. The crowd in Paris believes they are watching Darnay die, not Carton. In effect, Carton steals Darnay’s death, and his theft is successful only because this death occurs both socially and biologically. But is there a sense in which Carton’s death might also somehow be the right one? And if this is the case, what does this mean for Dickens’s larger historical vision?

ALL FOR ONE, OR ONE FOR ALL?

For much of the novel, Sydney Carton lacks direction. He is a character without a story. Smart and able (as a boy he did all his peers’ schoolwork for them, while neglecting his own; as a man he does all of Stryver’s legal work for him), he lacks purpose. In this regard, he is positioned as a typically Dickensian liberal hero – an eccentric who stands out precisely because he is so utterly replaceable. And indeed, replaceability is his chief quality, as his physical likeness to Charles Darnay facilitates Darnay’s exoneration early on in the novel, when he is on trial for spying, in London. But when Carton arrives in Paris, he develops a plan, a purpose, a direction. The transformation is in fact quite creepy. He seems to enter a daze, repeating Christ’s

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152 At the time, the missing body is not interpreted as Barsad’s plot, but as Mrs Cruncher’s religious meddling. After failing to find a body in Barsad’s grave, Cruncher abuses his wife for “opposing” his business through prayer (169).
words (from John 11:25-26) over and over again as he moves slowly towards his suicide: “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (389). Like Madame Defarge, Carton becomes a figure through which the novel displays the gravitational pull of death. Like an automaton, he goes to the scaffold in Darnay’s place, where in the imagined soliloquy that closes the novel, he frames his suicide as an act of moral reformation—a “far, far better thing… than I have ever done” (390).

This end was not original. Though it may well be Dickens’s most remembered ending, it was not his own invention. He claimed the inspiration came during a performance of Wilkie Collins’s The Frozen Deep at Tavistock House in 1856, writing in a preface to the first edition of the novel, “When I was acting, with my children and friends, in Mr Wilkie Collins’s drama of The Frozen Deep, I first conceived the main idea of this story. A strong desire was upon me then, to embody it in my own person; and I traced out in my fancy, the state of mind of which it would necessitate the presentation to an observant spectator, with particular care and interest.”153 In the play, Dickens played the role of Richard Wardour, the brooding, rejected lover who, in a melodramatic turn at the end, sacrifices himself to save his rival, Frank Aldersley. Wardour represents the precursor of Sydney Carton, and in a letter to a friend, Dickens described the moment he began to reimagine the former as the latter: “Sometimes of late, when I have been very much excited by the crying of two thousand people over the grave of Richard Wardour, new ideas for a story have come into my head as I lay on the ground, with surprising force and brilliancy.”154 The audience’s pathetic reaction to Wardour’s death seemed to demonstrate the ending’s power, and Dickens subsequently planned A Tale to capitalize on such a scenario.155

But Dickens’s identification of The Frozen Deep as the germ of inspiration for A Tale is misleading. In fact, the victim substitution, or “bed-trick” ending, was in wide circulation by this point, particularly in stories of the Revolution. Richard Maxwell points out that Dickens was well aware of many works featuring list-minute substitutions at the guillotine, including Carlyle’s The French Revolution, Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton’s Zanoni, Dion Boucicault’s theatrical adaptation of Dumas’s Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge, and Watts Phillips’s play The Dead Heart.156 Each work presents a version of the same trope. Carlyle tells the story of Lieutenant-General Loiserolles, a nobleman who switches places in the tumbril with his son; Bulwer-Lytton’s Zanoni features a romantic entanglement in which the eponymous hero goes to the guillotine in place of his beloved, Viola (condemned by Robespierre); Boucicault’s staging of Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge likewise features a love triangle in which the hero and heroine

155 In this regard, Dickens follows the advice of Edgar Allen Poe, who writes in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.” Ironically, Poe himself claims to have derived this principle from Dickens, for he begins his essay with the following attribution: “Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of Barnaby Rudge, says — ‘By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his Caleb Williams backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done.’” See Edgar Allen Poe, The Complete Poetry and Selected Criticism ed. by Allen Tate (New York: The New American Library, 1968), 178.
156 See Appendix III of the Penguin A Tale of Two Cities, 431-440. If we were to look beyond the Victorian period for sources, the list would be quite a bit longer.
are arrested in the midst of a thwarted royalist plot to free Marie Antoinette during the Terror. Condemned, the two are saved at the last minute by a sympathetic republican friend who has become disillusioned by the Terror. (Unlike the English adaptation, in Dumas’s original novel a series of substitutions are attempted but fail, and all the principle characters are guillotined at the end.) Watts Phillips’s *The Dead Heart* is the clearest analogue to *A Tale*, so much so that accusations of plagiarism were volleyed back and forth by friends and supporters of both. In *The Dead Heart*, one of the protagonists is separated from his beloved and imprisoned in the Bastille by lettre de cachet, much like Dr Manette. Embittered by his long imprisonment, he becomes a powerful operative under Robespierre during the Terror, but is redeemed at the end when he sacrifices himself for his lover’s son, taking the youth’s place on the scaffold. As Maxwell writes, “the Victorian scene seems almost too well populated with advocates of a generous though often implausible strategy for freeing one’s loved ones from terror and revolution.”

What is unique about Dickens’s use of this topos, however, is that he empties it of overt political allegory. For each of Dickens’s precursors, the guillotine scene condenses a conflict between political classes, such that the substitution itself becomes a commentary on the Revolution: an elegy for the lost nobility, a condemnation of Jacobin fanaticism, a plea for moderation, etc. But in *A Tale*, Sydney Carton bears no concrete political relation to the historical process his sacrifice hopes to resolve. Carton is not the representative of any political body – he is no reactionary Girondist, no radical Jacobin, and certainly no defiant royalist. Rather, he is simply a body. And it is precisely as a body that his death can become meaningful – can function as the “right” death, in Brooks’s sense. Carton’s death acquires its stature as sacrifice *par excellence* because he is otherwise excluded from the cycle of historical violence in which Darnay himself is implicated. And Carton’s election to participate, however obliquely, in a process of historical restitution from which he is fundamentally excluded is, in turn, the defining feature of Dickens’s take on the historical novel. Lacking any recognizable political allegiance, Carton’s detachment enables him to stand in not only for Darnay (liberal heir to French nobility, political émigré), but for the supposed everyman consumed by the Revolution. For Dickens, the death of this everyman – the individual as such – is the price of a state whose sovereignty is expressed primarily through mass execution. (Leave aside the question of whether such an individual could have, in fact, existed in the midst of the Revolution, let alone its wake.) Where other writers use substitution to frame the Revolution as a particular kind of political failure, the ending of *A Tale* stresses that the condition of the Republic, from the beginning, was a subordination, perhaps even a destruction, of personal life.

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157 Dumas’s novel (1845) is a good example of the hold the *Waverley* model still exerted in France at mid-century. The wavering hero is Maurice, a respected Republican who falls in love with Geneviève, a royalist. Maurice’s love for Geneviève overwhelms his political allegiance, and he eventually finds himself aiding in her plots to free Marie Antoinette, unwittingly only at first. Meanwhile, the zealous Jacobin who foils each attempt to spring the queen discovers each plot not because of his vigilant dedication to the Republic, but because of his personal jealousy of Maurice.

158 *The Dead Heart* was staged at the Adelphi in November 1859, while Tom Taylor’s production of *A Tale of Two Cities* ran simultaneously at the Lyceum (with Dickens’s collaboration). In a letter to the *New York Times* Phillips states that the plot of his drama was inspired by the Loiserolles substitution episode described by Carlyle (mentioned above), and a well-known story of a “living corpse” rescued from the Bastille in 1789, who later “crawled back to his dungeon as the only place that could to him represent a home,” *The New York Times* (December 25, 1860). On the accusations of plagiarism made against Dickens and Phillips both, see Holm, 252-257.

159 Appendix III of the Penguin *A Tale of Two Cities*, 440.

The final scene in the diegesis presents the contradiction of the Republic in the form of a question. A young seamstress, accused of “plots,” awaits the guillotine alongside Sydney Carton. She asks Carton if she will be reunited in Heaven with her poor cousin, and the conversation that ensues is the first time in the novel that Revolutionary ideology is explicitly articulated by a character: “If the Republic really does good to the poor, and they come to be less hungry, and in all ways to suffer less, she may live a long time; she may even live to be old...[Will it] seem long to me, while I wait for her in the better land where I trust both you and I will be mercifully sheltered?” (388). Supposing the victory of the Republic will grant her cousin a longer life, the seamstress worries about the experience of time after death. If her early execution aids the Republic, will this mean she has longer to wait before the family is reunited? The naïve question only barely disguises Dickens’s larger criticism of the Terror’s logic, its insistence on subordinating individual lives to collective happiness. The seamstress’s interpretation of the Terror is in line with Robespierre’s: Terror is a necessary means of ridding the nascent Republic of its internal enemies in order to secure universal happiness. Or, as Robespierre put it, “We must stifle the internal and external enemies of the Republic, or perish with it; and in this situation, the first maxim of your policy should be that the people are led by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror.”161 But the seamstress’s question implicitly foregrounds the absurdity of imagining any causal relationship between her death and her cousin’s prolonged life. The Republic may demand that some die sooner so that others may live longer, but in A Tale, the relation between the two is so abstract as to be essentially non-existent.162

Except in Carton’s case. Carton does in fact die so that others may live. His death releases Darnay and simultaneously accomplishes what appears to be a moral regeneration of the angry crowd in Paris. As he waits for his number to be called, Carton imagines a kind of non-denominational Christian salvation attending his death, as he once more repeats Christ’s words: “I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die” (389).

162 There are spies in Dickens’s Paris (like Barsad), but spies are not the ones being executed.
In *All the Year Round*, a bar appears across the column like a blade separating the final coda from the body of the novel. When the text resumes, the narrator evokes the crowd to gather his account of Carton’s death: “They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peacefullest man’s face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic” (389). We might wonder when, exactly “there” is. Is the narrator referring to Carton as he climbs the scaffold, or immediately after, as the executioner holds his severed head aloft? What, in other words, is sublime and prophetic – Carton’s self-possession as he faces the death he has chosen, or the peace on his face in the grisly moment after death, when his head is presented to the crowd? The former suggests that it is Carton’s gentle acceptance of death that transforms the crowd; while the latter perhaps reminds them of all the deaths that lie ahead for the many people who are, like Carton, innocent – those still subject to the aftershocks of the Terror. Carton’s peaceful sublimity seems to trigger a true social transformation (just pages earlier the crowd was calling out, “Down Evrémonde! To the guillotine all aristocrats! Down, Evrémonde!”), but the significance of this conversion is importantly opaque (386). Carton’s death may transform him from aristocratic enemy of the people to sublime emblem of some greater peace to come, but the grounds of that peace are not disclosed.

Still, as he predicted before his number is called, Carton is resurrected, in the sense that he is given new life, remade by his death. And this new life takes the form of narrative. Though the narrator is cagey about the status of Carton’s final funereal oration, Dickens does cede the

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163 The narrator introduces Carton’s last words with the famously difficult sentence, “If he had given any utterance to his [thoughts], and they were prophetic, they would have been these” (389). As many have pointed out, the broken grammar of this sentence makes it impossible to pin down the status of the words that follow, because it is not clear where the weight of the hypothetical ought to fall. Are we meant to read the sentence as a double subjunctive, something like “if he had given utterance to his thoughts, and if they had been prophetic, then this is what they would have been”? Or is the narrator rather assuring us that Carton’s last thoughts were in fact prophetic, and that the crowd would have known that if Carton had uttered them? Either way, the ontological status of the speech that follows is unclear. The narrator distances himself from the closing paragraphs by placing Carton’s oration in quotation marks, yet the status of the quotation is itself undecidable – was Carton thinking this as he stood upon the scaffold? Or is this what Carton would have thought, had he had time to think it? Is his speech in fact
final page to Carton’s prophetic assurance that a long process of historical “expiation” will ensue, through which the “new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old” will perish and give way to “a beautiful city and a brilliant people” (389). But the prophetic anticipation of a happy Paris that Carton provides markedly omits any account of historical progress, stressing abstract chronological sequence over causal development:

I see Barsad, 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. 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 years to come, I 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. (389)

This is history as chronicle, a series of events with no illuminating cause or logic. Notice too that even from the vantage of 1859, Dickens is careful not to fix the end of the Revolution. For this reason, I am inclined to read these last words less as a soothing assurance that the Revolution will have made “expiation for itself” by 1859, than as an anxious projection into Dickens’s own future. Carton is not equipped to trace the springs of causation between his death and the contemporary reader’s present because there are none; his death can only stand allegorically for a spiritual rejuvenation that Dickens hopes will provide recompense for the historical violence the people have alternately endured and perpetrated. On the ground, Carton’s sacrifice secures the safety of one family, but it does nothing to stem the tide of the Terror. Carton offers fantasy, not insight – a utopian vision grounded in hope rather than history.

But Dickens’s decision to avoid fixing the Revolution’s course, given the ideological commitments this would entail, is perhaps not so surprising. What is remarkable, however, is how this historical perspective slips so seamlessly into the domestic sphere. From a wide view of French history Carton moves to the narrower scope of the Darnay family, where death acts as the guarantee of Carton’s legacy. As benefactor, he holds “a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence” (390). Imagining Lucie and Charles Darnay years later, on their death beds, Carton asserts his presence: “I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other’s soul, than I was in the souls of both” (390). And Carton’s shadow does not end at Lucie and Charles’s deaths. Lucie’s son, who takes Carton’s name and passes it on to his son in turn, brings the young child (Lucie’s grandson) to the Place de la Concorde, the site of Carton’s execution, and “[tells] the child my story, with a tender and a faltering voice” (390). Carton’s suicide thus liberates Charles Darnay, securing his domestic life with Lucie, and simultaneously transforms Carton’s life into a story that will in turn be sustained by the Darnay domestic sphere, binding generation to generation through successive retellings. As an act, Carton’s death secures the bourgeois family from the ravages of history by freeing Darnay to return to his new home. And as the material for a tale, Carton’s death sustains the family – the form of collective life Dickens is at greatest pains to validate.

prophetic, or is this what Carton would have said had his thoughts tended towards prophecy? See Richard Maxwell, “Introduction” to A Tale of Two Cities, xxxiii n. 28.

164 Carton’s vision, which extends two generations beyond his own, seems to arrive more or less at Dickens’s present day, thus aligning the reader of A Tale with the youngest Sydney (Sydney III?).
Death has a privileged place in narrative because narrative derives its force from death. As Walter Benjamin reflects in his great essay on Nikolai Leskov, “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.”165 The storyteller gains such authority because his narrative promises to mediate the actual, historical fact of death by integrating it into the life of a community. This was certainly Scott’s project; he gave readers the means to live with loss by incorporating it into life. In Scott, narrative grants death significance by pointing to the changes it makes in the world, by marking it as a point against which we might register a before and an after. In this sense, his novels make use of death to give readers the means to regard a particular way of life as over and done with, while simultaneously ensuring that it persists as memory, tradition, ideal. To the extent that narrative fails to do this, the past lives on in a bad sense, as the present demand of an unpaid debt.

For Dickens, such debts loomed large. He could not imagine a way to safely relegate the Terror to the past, partly because contemporary events (war in Crimea, the Siege of Cawnpore and the horrific retribution meted out by the British army in its wake, and scandalous accounts of Franklin’s last Arctic expedition devolving to cannibalism before perishing) seemed to insist that something very much like Terror was still in the process of unfolding. Against such a backdrop, we might expect the family to offer respite, but Charles and Lucie Darnay find themselves indebted as well. They must install Carton’s memory in their home, in their souls, and in their offspring, by continually retelling his story. If they live, they live for him. Narrative, like the wrong death, entails its own unpayable debts.

4. Islands in History: The Adventure Novel’s Static Present

When Robinsons opens his eyes on the morning after the storm that wrecked his ship, he sees a new world around him and begins a new life, reborn. When he fires his musket, it is the first time a gunshot has ever been heard on that island, and all the birds rise up into the air, complaining, to mark the arrival of history.

~ Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*

Late in H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, Allan Quartermain and his band of English treasure hunters find themselves trapped in a cave. In search of diamonds, they have been led to the novel’s eponymous mines in the heart of the fictional African kingdom of Kukuanaland. The cave is located deep in Kukuanaland, in a place known only to the kingdom’s oldest inhabitant: the witch Gagool. Gagool guides Quartermain’s crew to the treasure room, where they find an altar overflowing with jewels, gold, and ivory. But after revealing the treasure, she kills their companion Foulata, and triggers an enormous stone trapdoor to seal them inside. As she attempts to flee, Gagool herself is crushed under the massive stone. The three men – Quartermain, Sir Henry Curtis, and Captain Good – are now stranded inside the treasure room, apparently sealed off from the rest of the cavern. As their lamp grows dim, Sir Henry decides, “let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” Quartermain considers their lot: “the great mass of white tusks, the boxes of gold, the corpse of poor Foulata stretched before them, the goat-skin full of treasure, the dim glimmer of diamonds, and the wild, wan faces of us three white men there awaiting death by starvation.” Then, in a foreboding flourish, the flickering light goes out: “Suddenly it sank, and expired.”

What kind of suspense is this? What is the object of uncertainty here? Or, to put the question differently, what is the relation between the crisis framed by the discursive break, and the narrative progression that develops around it? What is this cliffhanger trying to do? My sense is that we are not, in fact, uncertain about whether our heroes will make it out of the cave alive. Even if their plight in the cave is real enough, the threat rings hollow, and the cliffhanger invites us to envision a crisis that we know full well will soon be resolved. In this generic system, minor characters like Foulata may be sacrificed to render the danger of the situation legitimate, but our protagonist will certainly not die – his safety is built into the novel’s narrative conceit, because Quartermain is narrating the story in retrospect. And the novel is not about to transform into an “I am dead” story (like Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” or *Sunset Boulevard*). Indeed, the risk Quartermain evokes when he introduces his story is not that he will die, but that he will stop writing: “I wonder what sort of history it will be when I have done it, if I ever come to the end of the trip!” (41).

If we are in fact concerned for Quartermain, then, it is only at a procedural level: it is only unclear how he will escape, not whether he will. But if there is little question that Quartermain will escape, why produce a cliffhanger here? What does this suspension actually do? For if the threat to Quartermain’s life is, in a sense, empty, the cliffhanger is nonetheless

The novel’s form thus presents as an open question what its content rules out. What, then, is the difference between the content and the form of suspense in *King Solomon’s Mines*?

This much seems clear: the narrative tension generated by this cliffhanger is quite different from what we found in the historical fiction of Scott and Dickens. If the device itself looks similar—an unresolved scene punctuated by a discursive cut—the effect is very different, for there is little question of any real narrative consequence following from the crisis framed here. We are not, as in Scott, witnessing the active unfolding of a historical sequence; nor, as in Dickens, are we confronting a kind of endless procedural abyss threatening to void any possibility of historical change. Here, the cliffhanger only feints at an alternate trajectory. If it holds out the possibility of a shift in the course of the plot, this is simply perfunctory, for there is no real sense that Quartermain and his friends could die in the heart of Kukuanaland.

And yet this cliffhanger is not inconsistent, as I have defined inconsistency thus far. This is not a case where our impression of the crisis is simply an illusion generated by the discursive cut, as we saw in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Quartermain really is trapped. In this sense, Quartermain’s imminent death is not so much a legitimate narrative possibility that the novel invites us to contemplate, as a strategy for amplifying the significance of the scene that follows. By teasing the possibility (indeed the certainty) of Quartermain’s death, the discursive framing clears space for something else—a more important moral transformation that functions as the true yield of Quartermain’s adventure. For despite all the action of the novel, its true crisis takes place in the treasure room, in the scene that follows the cliffhanger. For it is here, finally possessed of the diamonds he has been seeking from the start, that Quartermain’s confinement renders his newfound wealth worthless. This epiphany is itself a trope of adventure, borrowed directly from *Robinson Crusoe*. Just as Crusoe denigrates the pounds sterling he finds on his island as “nasty sorry useless Stuff,” Quartermain now ponders the uselessness of the riches all around him: “There around us lay treasures enough to pay off a moderate national debt, or to build a fleet of ironclads, and yet we would gladly have bartered them all for the faintest chance of escape. Soon, doubtless, we should be glad to exchange them for a bit of food or a cup of water, and, after that, even for the privilege of a speedy close to our sufferings. Truly wealth, which men spend all their lives in acquiring, is a valueless thing at the last.”

Much like Crusoe, Quartermain realizes here that money is useless when removed from the circuit of exchange, detached from the social world that grants it value. It is a generic staple: isolated from the social world, the adventurer experiences unmediated necessity, and is hence disillusioned with the empty attachments of modern life, all of which are mere fictions and abstractions. Within the genre’s value-system, this is generally a good thing. The experience invigorates the adventurer, banishes the shallow appeal of gold and jewels, and re-orient him towards the “real” world, which is tangible, physical, solid.

The cliffhanger that introduces this particular scene underlines Quartermain’s re-orientation by restricting our attention to the demands of the immediate present. Just as Quartermain himself renounces the abstraction of money in favor of more tangible use values, the cliffhanger asks us to ignore the larger conceptual apparatus of the narrative and focus only on what’s near to hand, on the present and the immediate gravity of Quartermain’s physical situation.

All the while, the underlying security of the English characters is never really at risk, generically speaking. The cliffhanger merely provides ballast for a more important shift in the

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economics of the treasure hunt: the treasure must remain in Africa because it is ultimately not as real, not as important as our protagonist’s lives. And this sober realization ironically provides absolution for the more modest plundering that does actually occur: when Quartermain escapes, he brings enough diamonds in his pockets to make everyone rich once they return to England. If wealth is “a valueless thing at the last,” it is nonetheless worth pocketing a diamond or two just to be safe. (Years before Quartermain, Crusoe likewise chooses not to throw his “nasty sorry useless stuff” away into the ocean.) The wealth Quartermain does eventually accrue from his diamonds is now, in a sense, deserved, thanks to the conversion he has undergone. The brush with death chastens him such that his priorities are more firmly rooted in the practical world, and his disillusioned pragmatism licenses his reward.

Both the rupture of the cliffhanger – its formal violence, in a sense, and the actual violence surrounding it – Foulata’s murder, Gagool’s horrible death under the stone door, and the threat of the heroes’ slow death by starvation – attempt to compensate for a more fundamental stasis in the world of these characters. For despite all the menaces they encounter, little about this world is, in fact, subject to change. This is surprising, as the core interest of the novel is the encounter between disparate historical orders: Quartermain’s intrusion into Kukuanaland represents nothing less than a band of modern Englishmen plunging headfirst into what is essentially an ancient kingdom, historically quarantined from the rest of the world. And yet, this intrusion yields surprisingly little change. Quartermain’s intervention ultimately results in the restoration of Ignosi to his rightful place as king. The liberation of the Kukuana people from Twala’s tyrannous rein is thus in fact a reversion back to the natural line of succession, to the way things once were and ought to remain. And this restoration is mirrored in the fortunes of the English characters – Sir Henry reunited with his estranged brother, and Allan Quartermain returning at last to England. The good life is behind, not ahead.

In this context, the cliffhanger performs a different function than it did in either Scott or Dickens. Rather than framing true alternatives in the narrative progression, it becomes a means of ratcheting up the stakes to generate the possibility of a conceptual shift in the outlook of the protagonist. Ironically, in this regard the cliffhanger – which in Scott and Dickens has been used to capture the disorientation of historical crisis – here discloses the appeal of a fundamentally static, unchanging world around the principle characters. The novel now needs cliffhangers to externalize and render visible a process of change that is entirely internal.

In this last chapter, my focus will be the cliffhanger in this new guise. And it will be a very recognizable cliffhanger function, for this is exactly what cliffhangers look like when they emerge in the Hollywood serial films that grant them the name “cliffhanger.” It should come as little surprise that before the device was used in these early Hollywood “chapter plays,” it had already become a convention of the fiction that would provide so much material for those films. Aimed at younger readers and serialized in cheap weekly magazines like Young Folks’ and Boys’ Own, Victorian adventure tales traded heavily in the kind of cliffhangers that gave the device its twentieth-century reputation. They were regarded as cheap and manipulative, evidence of clumsy plotting and poor design. I discussed such cliffhangers briefly in my introduction, in the context of Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island. There, we saw a cliffhanger inviting us to despair that our hero was irretrievably lost, plunging to his death. In the subsequent chapter this death turned out to be a snare, because the cliffhanger claimed the power to revise narrative action, and thus re-establish the story’s generically-determined arc. The cliffhanger no longer opened up an alternative trajectory for the story; rather, it served to underline the necessity of the determined
one. In this chapter, I will discuss what is at stake in this transformation, and what it means for

the novel.

But to grasp the cliffhanger’s new function, it will help to understand the larger generic

relationship between the texts I have been discussing thus far—historical novels—and Victorian

adventure fiction, the genre that provides much of the material Hollywood draws on as it
develops the cliffhanger into a fully-fledged cinematic genre. Before moving into the new
dynamics of the cliffhanger in adventure fiction, I will first treat the relationship between the
historical novel itself and adventure fiction, and focus specifically on the way the
anthropological impulse behind Scott’s historical novel gets reformulated as the ethnographic
fascination of adventure fiction. For what is at stake in this transformation bears directly on the
new form of the cliffhanger, as Hollywood inherits it from late-Victorian adventure fiction.

RACE AS HISTORY

Though he has no interest in adventure fiction, Lukács offers insight into the
prioritization of race as historical discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century—a
prioritization that bears directly on the historical project of the genre. Lukács broaches the topic
in his attempt to account for what happens to the progressive ideology of history in the years
between the French Revolution and the “farce” of the 1848 revolutions. As the Revolution
churned to a halt and the Bourbon monarchy was reinstated in France, reactionary historical
perspectives gained ground. Monarchical legitimists asserted that the Revolution had been an
aberration, an unfortunate departure from the true course of history. Hoping to roll back the
political and economic changes wrought by the Revolution, these reactionaries claimed that
history was “a silent, natural, ‘organic’ growth, that is, a development of society which is
basically stagnation, which alters nothing in the time-honoured, legitimate institutions of society
and, above all, alters nothing consciously. Man’s activity in history is ruled out completely.”169

In Britain this view is echoed in the more Burkean, conservative understanding of history—a
faith in precedent and tradition for their own sakes, and a belief that institutions are legitimated
by virtue of their persistence through time. From this perspective, the Revolution appeared like a
sudden eruption of violence from an otherwise fixed course of largely insignificant, incremental
change.

This reactionary historicism forced the champions of progress to produce what Lukács
calls “a new ideological armour” (26-7). The revolutionary bourgeoisie had benefited from the
Revolution’s reconfiguration of social, political, and economic relations, and they were loath to
give up the progress they had made. So, to defend their gains, they needed to counter the
Legitimists by showing that the Revolution was not some accidental outburst of violence, but the
necessary culmination of an ongoing historical process that would continue into the future.

Hegel’s dialectical project represented such a theory, because it placed conflict at the heart of
historical development, thus making it possible to grasp Enlightenment, Revolution, and Terror
all fruit of the same tree. As Kent Puckett puts it, Hegel found a way to tell a story that would
“both save the Revolution and reveal the Terror, while terrible, as part of some larger, more

169 Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983),
26.
Far from opposed, revolution and historical development were in fact the same, and this allowed Hegel “to preserve the achievements of the French Revolution as the imperishable basis of future human development.”

But in the generations following the fall of Napoleon, the position of the bourgeoisie changed, and from their new place at the top of the food chain, revolutionary measures of social and political reconfiguration came to appear too extreme. Beneficiaries of the Revolution now occupied enjoyed power and influence that the ancien régime had once commanded, so the gun seemed to be pointed at them. Further political and economic emancipation must come at the bourgeoisie’s expense. Thus, “while they comprehend the necessity of revolutions in the past and see in them the foundation for all that is reasonable and worthy of affirmation in the present, nevertheless they interpret future development in terms of a henceforth peaceful evolution on the basis of these achievements…they seek the positive things in the new world order created by the French Revolution and do not consider any new revolution to be necessary for the final realization of these positive things” (29). And this complacency eventually calcifies an outright apology for capitalism, thus taking the progress of the Revolution for granted while detaching that progress from the process that produced it. As Marx declared in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, by 1848 “The bourgeoisie had a true insight into the fact that all the weapons which it had forged against feudalism turned their points against itself, that all the means of education which it had produced rebelled against its own civilization, that all the gods which it had created had fallen away from it. It understood that all the so-called liberties and organs of progress attacked and menaced its class rule at its social foundation and its political summit simultaneously, and had therefore become socialistic.”

Since the course of “progress” now seemed to attack bourgeois interests, the idea of historical progress itself had to be rethought entirely, and the dominant understanding of historical development became one in which “So far as an ideology of progress continues to prevail…every element of contradiction is extinguished from it, history is conceived as a smooth straightforward evolution” (174). In practical terms, this meant discarding notions of historical change that highlighted the competing interests of different economic classes. History ceased to be understood as the generative conflict between different classes within a single people. Instead, conflicts freighted with historical significance were increasingly interpreted as wars between distinct populations with innate (rather than contingent) differences. The rise of “two nations” thinking buttressed this thinking by providing a model for figuring competing economic interests as intrinsic differences of identity. And this proved particularly valuable as a justification for the global British empire that emerged with the modern form of capital.

Lukács’s account of the historical novel always has empire in mind, but nowhere more so than when he describes the attitudes towards history that take root in the period following the 1848 revolutions, for this is where the imperial model of history finds its intellectual footing. Lukács identifies two crucial movements in this process. First, the embrace of Malthusian (and later Darwinian) principles of struggle, cast as universal laws to justify “the brutal dominion of capital” (175). And related to this is the emergence and general acceptance of a new conception of race. Several figures – Augustin Thierry, Hippolyte Taine, and Arthur de Gobineau – give voice to a line of thinking in which race comes to account for existing social relations. Race,
broadly construed, subsumes economics, religion, geography, and cultural production in explaining the uneven development of different regions and peoples. To take only one example, Gobineau argues in his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* that three races produced the trans-historical class hierarchy of noble, bourgeois, and commoner, with the noble representing the conquering race, the bourgeoisie a mixed race nearing the purity of the nobility, and the commoner a “lower race,” which “came about in the south through miscegenation with the negroes and in the north with the Finns.”  

“Race,” Lukács writes, “is turned into a thoroughly unhistorical and anti-historical mythical entity,” as “History is negated in a reactionary fashion and dissolved partly into an ahistorical system of sociological ‘laws.’”

Lukács describes the race theory of the mid- to late-nineteenth century as “unhistorical and anti-historical,” but it’s worth stressing that the attraction of scientific racism at this moment was precisely the historical work it seemed to do. With the emergence of this new race theory, historical difference itself becomes naturalized as race. Lukács is evoking a fairly strict Marxist-Hegelian notion of the “historical” here, which is why he insists that Taine and others replaced history with race as a means of accounting for social difference. But as Priti Joshi writes, where before “race” had functioned essentially as a synonym for family, class, or nation, now it began to describe something both more and less historical. No longer aligned with individual familial genealogies, race now became the signifier of a different kind of group belonging, as “Differences – physical as well as cultural (religion, customs and social organization, for instance) – between humans were increasingly identified as inborn characteristics.”

Race is understood less as “an identifying feature of another group” and more as “a cause of that group’s differences.” It was this causal work – this sense of race as an explanation for historical difference grounded in biology – that constituted the appeal of scientific racism. Diverse human practices and relations (religious practices, social organizations, economic relations, aesthetic practices, taboos and customs – the materials of Scott’s antiquarian vision) were agglomerated as expressions of a single determining cause: race. Philip Curtin writes, “where earlier writers had held that race was an important influence on human culture, the new generation saw race as the crucial determinant, not only of culture but of human character and of all history.” And because race promised to explain the origin of the qualities and capabilities of the person (and hence the group), differences between societies could now be understood as the effects of biological determinants, rather than politics, economics, or culture. As Patrick Brantlinger puts it, “For many Victorian intellectuals...race conflict rather than class struggle explained the major developments of prehistory and history. If antagonisms between social classes at home could be interpreted racially, as outcomes of nature, then middle- and upper-class consciences were assuaged and the inequities of wealth and poverty justified.”

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175 *The Historical Novel*, 176. Though René Wellek argues that Taine’s use of “race” is more akin to “Nation” or people, and should not be conflated with its twentieth-century sense, for Lukács’s purposes, Taine’s emphasis on the inherited effects of environmental conditions (“A race exists having acquired its character from the climate, from the soil, the food and the great events that it underwent at its origin”) is very much in line with the scientific discourses of race as it emerges in the nineteenth century. See Wellek’s “Hippolyte Taine’s Literary Theory and Criticism” *Criticism* 1.1 (Winter 1959), 3.


hierarchy as readily as it explained the expansion and power of an empire ‘on which the sun
never set.’” 179 At an analytical level, race began to do the work of class in both explaining and predicting the course of history.

Scientific racism thus represents one of “the different, often conflicting trends into which the historicism of the earlier period disintegrated.” 180 And as historicism disintegrates, the historical novel itself changes as well. At a formal level, the clearest sign of the obfuscation of the pastness of the past is the accumulation of description. Description, as Lukács famously writes, “contemporizes everything.” 181 Unlike narration, which is concerned with change and causality, description brings the world it represents into a kind of suspended present – not the immediate present of drama, in which the audience and actors share the moment of performance – but an “illusory” and “static” present, a timeless present deprived of the possibility of action. 182 The meticulous documentation of the past in a novel like The Cloister and the Hearth, while it may seem to revel in the strangeness of the past, thus in fact serves primarily to modernize it. Overlooking the radical differences in ways of life, patterns of thought, and horizons of possibility that constitute true historical change, and focusing instead on exotic pictures of foreign costumes and manners, the historical novel in this vein projects the present onto the past, rather than bringing the past into a concrete relation with the present. History ceases to be narratable.

One important effect of this shift away from narration and towards description is the isolation of struggle or conflict from the larger historical processes that produce it. The violence of history in particular loses its historical character, and is reduced to a barbarous spectacle, a kind of gladiatorial game. Flaubert’s depictions of the suffering of the siege of Carthage in Salammbô (1862), described in graphic detail, demonstrate the point. The suffering of the Carthaginians is “simply horrible, senseless torment…the suffering yields no single conflict or action which might humanly interest or grip us.” 183 (193). The claim is not that suffering was absent in Scott – Lukács stresses that cruelty and brutality were not “in any way ironed out or mitigated” in the Waverley novels. But for Scott, episodes of cruelty were of interest “insofar as they were necessary expressions of definite forms of class struggle” (193). In the later historical novel, this sense of struggle is displaced, such that brutality becomes an end in itself. We saw this transformation taking place in A Tale of Two Cities, as the violence of the ancien régime gave way to the violence of the Terror, with its parade of victims carted to the guillotine for no discernible reason. In Dickens, though, this gesture of historical equivalence at least pointed to the very hollowness of violence as itself the object of critique. But where violence once appeared in historical fiction as a sobering presence – the awful product of history’s larger movements – as the century progresses, it increasingly serves to obscure such movements. Violence takes center stage, elbowing history into the wings.

For Lukács, the new anti-historicism of the late-century historical novel represents a decisive turn away from the form’s original imaginative project. No longer does the

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179 See Brantlinger, Taming Cannibals, 135.
180 Lukács, The Historical Novel, 176.
182 Ibid. I want to stress that the practice of description that Lukács chastises for its anti-historical aims is very different from the ideal of description we found Peter Pattieson and Dick Tinto arguing over in The Bride of Lammermoor. There, Tinto argued that description was a means of making present – a means, in fact, of narration – in precisely the dramatic sense that Lukács champions.
183 Lukács, The Historical Novel, 193.
historical novel aim to represent the relation between private lives and public histories, no longer does it give form to the lived experience of history, no longer does it seek to illuminate the prehistory of the present, the relation between then and now. Instead, exoticism now becomes the sign of history. History becomes that which shimmers “colourfully in its distance, remoteness and otherness,” and the historical novel takes up the task of “fulfilling the intense longing for escape from this present world of dreariness.”\textsuperscript{184} The widespread turn away from the Hegelian concept of contradictory development and toward a conception of history as a slow, unchanging, evolutionary process reflects a deeper rejection of what, for Lukács, constitutes historical thinking altogether: history as dialectical struggle.\textsuperscript{185} The historical novel becomes unhistorical – exotic, strange, and in some cases savage. It ceases to reveal developmental relations between past and present. Thus, though they may believe they are making the past accessible by rendering it visible to contemporary readers, late-century novelists were in fact obscuring the past’s existence as past – as prehistory or precondition of the present.

Taken together, however, the tendencies Lukács identifies as central to the transformation of the historical novel as it disintegrates into anti-historicism, in fact describe the core features of adventure fiction, which was emerging as a more and more popular form at the time of the historical novel’s decline. As we will see, adventure fiction is generally flush with long descriptions that amplify the exoticism of foreign settings and reduce any sense of a temporal dynamic between object and observer. It certainly prioritizes visceral representations of violence, and more than any other genre in the period, adventure fiction is structured around encounters between white Europeans and other races. As I will show, in many ways adventure fiction accentuates the changes the historical novel was undergoing in this later stage, distilling the transformed essence of the historical novel. And the most important of these changes was to discard the possibility of contradictory development in favor of a race-based telos of struggle between civilizations.

\section*{DESCRIBING TIME}

The classical historical novel borrowed many descriptive conventions from travel writing, because, as with travelogue, vivid impressions of specifically localized features were important to historical fiction. The historical novel sought to capture a whole way of life – foreign to the modern English reader – and make it comprehensible, with its own values. The external perspective of the observer allows for an emphasis on sensory detail, which produces a kind of “objective” account of things. This in turn provides the ground for

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 206.
\textsuperscript{185} Along these lines, we also often find the past flattened into what Lukács calls a “dead environment” – a “historical milieu” that has little discernible relation to the inner life of the characters. As a result, the connection between the characters’ desires and the historical pressures shaping those desires becomes opaque. Historical novels with more modern settings, like Elizabeth Gaskell’s \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers} (1863) and Thomas Hardy’s \textit{The Trumpet-Major} (1880), both set against the Napoleonic Wars, are more invested in a kind of regional portraiture than in analyzing the dramatic intersection of public histories and private lives. These family dramas are shaped less by historical change than by the environments they live in – environments marked more significantly by geology than political or military history. The dynamics of provincialism animate these novels, as the geographical isolation of the community becomes a means for registering the intrusion of human history, itself fleeting. Press gangs, military parades, and the threat of foreign invasion function as incidents that enliven and complicate otherwise static worlds.
an explanatory or historicizing move meant to lend depth to the scene’s surface, in which visible phenomena are linked with the economic conditions that produce them. Balzac points out this new function and significance of description in the work of Stendhal, and as Lukács notes, Balzac himself considered Scott to be the originator of the new practice.\textsuperscript{186}

The point here is that description is never “pure” in the historical novel. Rather, it is continually “transformed into action,” rendered dramatic. The historical novel’s practice of description is meant to resemble epic ekphrasis, where the goal was not simply to capture the visual appearance of a world or a thing – to render the surface visible to the reader – but to reveal that appearance as itself an ongoing series of actions. To tell its history, in other words. In epic, visual description triggers a flight of the metonymic imagination which traces the history of the object, before ultimately returning to the object itself, which now stands forth as the effect of a longer process. Lessing describes this function in his reflections on ekphrasis in \textit{Laocoon}. In the Iliad, rather than simply describe the outward appearance of a sceptre, which, he notes, Homer might have done “had he been writing a description for a book of heraldry, from which at some later day an exact copy was to be made,” instead, in the Iliad, “he gives us the history of the sceptre. First we see it in the workshop of Vulcan; then it shines in the hands of Jupiter; now it betokens the dignity of Mercury; now it is the baton of warlike Pelops; and again the shepherd’s staff of peace-loving Atreus…And so at last I know this sceptre better than if a painter should put it before my eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into my hands.”\textsuperscript{187} The historical novel deploys description in the manner of travel-writing, using it to signal regional and cultural difference, while at the same time retaining epic’s mobilization of description as the license for narrating a history of production. Description exists to spur the account of why something appears the way it does.

It is this second, epic function of description that Lukács sees dissolving in the move towards naturalist description. Description ceases to function as the index of experience and instead aims for what Lessing refers to as “a book of heraldry, from which at some later day an exact copy was to be made.” This is a purer or flatter mode of description, driven by an impulse that seeks to faithfully reproduce a thing, rather than provide the (epic) understanding of the part in relation to the larger whole of life. Lukács repeatedly stresses how this latter ethic of description flattens or “levels” the world, because it refuses to order the world in terms of causal force or significance. Without any hierarchy of representation, in which the part’s inclusion in a description is motivated by its capacity to illuminate or secure the configuration of the whole, all the tiny individual details become equally relevant. And this “autonomy of the details,” ultimately has a “deleterious” effect on the representation of life, obstructing the reader’s sense of the bigger picture, precisely because (as Lessing argued), it is a bigger picture – a static image robbed of time itself, and thus lacking any sense of change, contingency, or history.\textsuperscript{188}

\textsuperscript{186} See Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”, 117.
\textsuperscript{187} Lessing, \textit{Laocoön}, 96-7. As I discussed in my second chapter, in \textit{The Bride of Lammermoor}, Scott worked through Lessing’s theories of \textit{ekphrasis} and pictorial versus narrative representation by way of Henry Fuseli’s update of these ideas.
\textsuperscript{188} Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” 132. Fredric Jameson challenges Lukács’s account of naturalism’s detemporalization of description, arguing that in fact Zola adds a dimension of temporality to his descriptions in order to set them in motion, much as Monet depicts scenes slowly lightening or darkening. For Jameson this is one of the means by which Zola generates a sense of the autonomy of sensory experience, detached from verbal representation, which itself constitutes the space of affect in the realist novel. While unlike Lukács, Jameson clearly
Lukács characterizes the divergence between naturalism’s autonomous description and epic’s active description in terms of the different kinds of perspective that generate either: the perspective of the observer or of the participant. Flat description is the product of the detached, neutral observer, who stands aloof and reproduces the world as a catalogue of visual features. The participant, by contrast, uses description to generate an experience of a dynamic world, a world that is the product of change.

Adventure fiction lands in the middle of these two modes, and blends aspects of both. As mentioned above, one of the more stable features of the adventure novel is its first-person, retrospective, homodiegetic narration, which necessarily produces description out of the first-hand experience of the narrator. And from *Robinson Crusoe* on, the adventure novel is generally grounded not simply in the experience, but the voice of its protagonist, foregrounding not only the partial view of a (generally) middle-class European man, but the discourse of that man as well. This is an outsider perspective, the gaze of a stranger in a new place, and at the same time the verbal construction of that place by resort to the idiom of the familiar. It is thus an experience devoid of access to the history of the terrains and communities it encounters. And this blended perspective – a mix of immediate sensory experience grounded in a particular person’s body, and an outsider perspective that is not intimate with the terrain surveyed – gives rise to all manner of reconfigurations of the relation between the familiar and the strange. Rather than defamiliarizing things, in Shklovsky’s sense, adventure fiction’s characteristic mode of description foregrounds empirical attention to the sensual surfaces of things in metaphorical language that alternately familiarizes and enchants. In a sense, it aims to wobble the familiar/strange dichotomy.

In R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*, for example, narrator Ralph Rover and his fellow castaway Jack dive to the bottom of a coral reef early in their time on a Fijian island, where they have washed ashore following a shipwreck:

> I shall never forget my surprise and delight on first beholding the bottom of the sea. As I have before stated, the water within the reef was as calm as a pond; and, as there was no wind, it was quite clear, from the surface to the bottom, so that we could see down easily even at a depth of twenty or thirty yards. When Jack and I dived in shallower water, we expected to have found sand and stones, instead of which we

revels in Zola’s descriptions, it is not clear to me that his sense of Zola’s accomplishment differs very much from Lukács’s. For Jameson, Zola’s work demonstrates one of the ways that affect “appropriates a whole narrative apparatus and colonizes it,” and insofar as affect is, for Jameson, a kind of climate of sensory experience devoid of agent or meaning – “states of the world” that simply exist – his account of Zola does not strike me as significantly at odds with Lukács’s description of naturalism. See Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 50-77.

189 A particularly good example of this: in *King Solomon’s Mines*, Haggard foregrounds Allan Quartermain’s partial, non-omniscient perspective by means of misattributed literary quotations. Quartermain uses lines from Walter Scott’s *Marmion* to describe an epic battle, but then attributes these lines to Richard Barham’s “Ingoldsby Legends,” a popular collection of ghost stories first printed in 1837. Robert Louis Stevenson took issue with Quartermain’s misattribution, but Haggard pointed out to him that Quartermain’s “habit of attributing sundry quotations to the Old Testament and the Ingoldsby Legends, the only books with which he was familiar, was a literary joke.” See Stevenson’s letter to Haggard, reprinted in Haggard, *King Solomon’s Mines*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), 247 n. 1.

found ourselves in what appeared really to be an enchanted garden. The whole of the bottom of the lagoon, as we called the calm water within the reef, was covered with coral of every shape, size, and hue. Some portions were formed like large mushrooms; others appeared like the brain of a man, having stalks or necks attached to them; but the most common kind was a species of branching coral, and some portions were of a lovely pale pink colour, others pure white.  

Franco Moretti has drawn attention to the stylistic metamorphosis that often takes place in the historical novel at or near geographical borders, noting for example how Edward Waverley’s journey into the Scottish Highlands generates “a sudden figural leap” whereby “plain style is quickly discarded” in favor of metaphorical language like glaring orb, fiery vehicle, and Evil Genius. Moretti argues that the unknown environment necessitates a spike in metaphorical language, because figural language gives form to the unknown: “in an unknown space, we need an immediate ‘semantic sketch’ of our surroundings…and only metaphors know how to do it.” We see a similar turn to metaphorical language in The Coral Island, as the underwater seascape is both domesticated and romanticized in a single gesture. It is “an enchanted garden,” filled with strangely familiar shapes: mushrooms, human brains, and tree-like branches made wonderful in pink and white. In Lukács’s terms, this sort of description is flat. Entirely visual, it lacks a temporal dimension that would begin to hint at the larger causal processes the produced the objects surveyed.

What strikes me as most significant about descriptions like these, however, is that they tend to catalyze the protagonist’s place as an outsider, an observer: all is strange and new, and requires the immediate ‘semantic sketch’ of metaphor to render it comprehensible. Although the figures Ballantyne draws on belong to a very different generic tradition than those Moretti finds in Scott – they belong to natural history, not romance or epic – this gravitation towards the observation of the outsider is intentional, and it bears important effects in the long run. In narrative terms, adventure fiction’s flat description tends to complicate Lukács’s dichotomy between observation and experience, because it highlights how the narrative itself is concerned with transforming observation into actionable experience. The drift of the adventure novel is always the transformation of observer into participant. This narrative syntagm is most pronounced in Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island, where Jim Hawkins’s eavesdropping repeatedly rescues the band of treasure-hunters from Long John Silver’s mutinous plots. Hidden in the apple barrel aboard the Hispaniola, Jim overhears Silver scheming; later, on the island, he witnesses Silver murder a sailor who refuses to join his band. Both times, the knowledge Jim gleans from observing Silver’s clandestine actions allows Jim and his colleagues to anticipate Silver’s plots and act accordingly, first by recruiting several men to remain loyal to the captain, and then by preemptively abandoning the Hispaniola and taking refuge in the stockade to defend

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193 A similar blend of exotic and familiar, sensual detail and metaphorical sketching, marks narrator Allan Quartermain’s early descriptions of Kukuanaland in King Solomon’s Mines: “The brook, of which the banks were clothed with dense masses of a gigantic species of maidenhair fern interspersed with feathery tufts of wild asparagus, babbled away merrily at our side, the soft air murmured through the leaves of the silver trees, doves cooed around, and bright-winged birds flashed like living gems from bough to bough. It was like Paradise.” Wild asparagus, birds “like living gems,” and air that softly murmurs in harmony with a “merry” babbling brook all enhance the magic of the place. Haggard, King Solomon’s Mines: 108-9.
themselves from Silver’s attack. Jim’s accidental observations – later described as “follies” – thus lay the groundwork for action.\footnote{See Robert Louis Stevenson, \textit{Treasure Island} (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 119.}

Pirates often compel the passive hero into action because pirates exercise violence outside the law, and in the adventure novel, lawless violence generally signals the intrusion of some force, some version of necessity that compels the hero to take a stand, to cease being a detached observer and instead become a participant. This is particularly pronounced in the conspicuous two-part structure of \textit{The Coral Island}. The first half of the novel is tranquil, as the boys revel in their isolation on the island. We are presented with a kind of schoolroom idyll, in which the foreign setting merely offers opportunity for the older boy Jack, the novel’s figure of ideal British masculinity, to extol the virtues of instructive reading. As the boys explore the island, sample its exotic fruits, and perform what essentially amount to science experiments on the sparkling beaches, Jack repeatedly draws on his reading to domesticate the island. Introducing Ralph and Peterkin to coconuts, Jack proudly attributes his useful knowledge of the natural world to the seemingly useless (and effeminate) act of reading: “I have been a great reader of books of travel and adventure all my life, and that has put me up to a good many things that you are, perhaps, not acquainted with” (22). Ballantyne clearly imagines \textit{The Coral Island} as just such a book of travel and adventure, and thus the novel we are reading becomes a prime example of the kind of instructive literature Jack refers to. The novel is purposefully detailed in its documentation of the boys’ attempts to create weapons to use for hunting, to build a fire, and to fashion a raft with which they explore the island coast. At one point, Ralph even creates a miniature aquatic ecosystem on the beach by erecting a barrier to create a small pool of ocean water, into which he imports a little sample of ocean life. When some of the crabs and other creatures die, he realizes that the water is growing too saline as it evaporates. Once he begins replenishing the evaporated water with fresh water, his coral garden thrives. This is the sort of drama that paces the first half of the novel.

But the happy isolation is shattered one day when the boys glimpse canoes on the horizon, making for the island: one tribe of Fijians in hot pursuit of another. As soon as the canoes land, women and children flee into the woods, while men fall to combat. It is a burst of human struggle into an otherwise quiet, domestic world. And Ralph’s narration of the battle emphasizes the tension between the static world of the boys and the violence playing out before them. While Ralph continues to employ a mixture of visual detail and metaphorical language to depict the combatants, he also emphasizes how the spectacle of violence makes him feel, weaving his own affective response into the circuit of description:

\begin{quote}
Most of the men wielded clubs of enormous size and curious shapes, with which they dashed out each other’s brains. As they were almost entirely naked, and had to bound, stoop, leap, and run, in their terrible hand-to-hand encounters, they looked more like demons than human beings. I felt my heart grow sick at the sight of this bloody battle, and would fain have turned away, but a species of fascination seemed to hold me down and glue my eyes upon the combatants. I observed that the attacking party was led by a most extraordinary being, who, from his size and peculiarity, I concluded was a chief. His hair was frizzed out to an enormous extent, so that it resembled a large turban. It was of a light-yellow hue, which surprised me much, for the man’s body was as black as coal, and I felt convinced that the hair
\end{quote}
must have been dyed. He was tattooed from head to foot; and his face, besides being
tattooed, was besmeared with red paint, and streaked with white. Altogether, with his
yellow turban-like hair, his Herculean black frame, his glittering eyes and white
teeth, he seemed the most terrible monster I ever beheld. He was very active in the
fight, and had already killed four men. (143)

Soon, the distance between Ralph and this visual spectacle is collapsed, as he and his
friends are drawn into the fight, themselves. The aggressors have captured a young girl,
Avatea, from the fleeing tribe, and the fearsome chief threatens to throw her into a fire as a
kind of sacrifice. Driven by chivalric altruism, Jack intervenes, and after some vicious
combat, kills the chief. Meanwhile Ralph and Peterkin rally the remaining men of the
opposing tribe, who had fled into the brush. Once Jack kills the chief, “in less than ten
minutes, the whole of our opponents were knocked down or made prisoners” (148).

Here, then, is action. And yet, despite the life-or-death stakes of their involvement in
the battle, the boys maintain a strict social distance from the community they have saved.
Soon after exchanging names, Jack is disgusted to find that the people he has just rescued
are themselves cannibals. When one cuts a piece of flesh from the awful chief’s corpse, Jack
intervenes: “‘Come, come, you blackguard,’ cried Jack, starting up and seizing the man by
the arm, ‘pitch that into the hole. Do you hear?’” (151). The leader of the tribe – Tararo –
grudgingly enforces Jack’s prohibition, but the relation between the boys and the tribe
grows uneasy, and soon after the tribe sets out again in their canoe, leaving the boys
“meditating on the wonderful events of the last few days” (153).

The boys’ first brush with action is thus contained, its effects circumscribed. The
boys retain a fundamental distance from the violence they have just witnessed and
participated in. This is essentially violence as spectacle – a kind of gladiatorial combat that
does little to shift the course of the story or the conditions of the protagonists. Though they
will meet Tararo and Avatea again later in the novel, under different circumstances, at this
point the sudden intrusion of violence onto their peaceful island is quickly resolved, with no
real effect on the status quo. Harmony is quickly re-established.

But in the very next chapter, the boys’ isolation is punctured more definitively. The
boys begin to interact with the world in a more consequential way, as they confront the key
figures of the imperial imagination – pirates, cannibals, and missionaries. Pirates appear and
wrench the novel out of its island stasis, for it is also only at this point that the boys begin to
think of getting back to England. The pirates represent sheer cruelty – a model perhaps, of
what the boys might have become without reading and religion. When the pirates land on
shore near the boys’ camp, one of the men grabs the boys’ pet cat by the tail and swings it
around his head before tossing it into the ocean. The cruelty lands close to home. When,
fleeing the pirates, the boys take refuge in a cavern, Ralph muses, “Little did we imagine
that the first savages who would drive us into [hiding] would be white savages, perhaps our
own countrymen” (159). The pirates thus represent a more proximate force of violence than
the Fijians, a kind of savagery that cannot be displaced onto the racial other. However much
the boys are terrified and disgusted at the pirates’ cruelty, it is nonetheless a form of
savagery that implicates them, that draws them in and forces them to act. And the textual
signal of this interpellation into a more brutal narrative world is the cliffhanger.

After spending the night hiding in the cavern, Ralph ventures out to see if the pirates
have gone. Running to the top of a cliff to get a good view of the island, Ralph is relieved
when he sees their ship sailing away: “I looked long and anxiously at her, and, giving vent to a deep sigh of relief, said aloud, ‘Yes, there she goes; the villains have been baulked of their prey this time at least.’ ‘Not so sure of that!’ said a deep voice at my side; while, at the same moment, a heavy hand grasped my shoulder, and held it as if in a vice” (160-161).

Interrupting Ralph’s sigh of relief, the sudden appearance of the pirate at Ralph’s side is especially surprising, because the novel has been entirely free of cliffhangers up to this point. Though the novel is thick with moments of danger and risk – a shipwreck that lands the boys on the island, a battle between warring Fijian tribes, a shark attack – despite these many incidents, any of which could have been effectively punctuated by cliffhangers, the novel has to this point steadfastly refrained. Instead, the discourse has been resolutely episodic, with dilemmas introduced early in each chapter cleanly resolved by the end. The result is a narrative with a kind of scout-manual feel to it, as the island provides fodder for Jack to teach the other boys how to adapt to their surroundings: the boys discover and delight in coconuts and breadfruit; the boys figure out how to start a fire; the boys learn how to hunt for wild pigs; the boys build a raft, and go fishing. Even the encounter with the warring Fijians is introduced and resolved in a single chapter, limiting its narrative pull. Tribal warfare, human sacrifice, and struggles to build a fire are all merely local instabilities, neatly contained in single chunks of narrative discourse.

But the cliffhanger promises to jolt us out of this didactic mode, into a more dynamic narrative system. The cliffhanger itself is consistent and continuous, with the next chapter picking up immediately where the previous one left off: “My heart seemed to leap into my throat at the words; and, turning round, I beheld a man of immense stature and fierce aspect regarding me with a smile of contempt” (161). With this, the cliffhanger introduces a more protracted rhythm of suspense into what had become a tedious discursive pattern. Narrative resolution no longer arrives on time at the end of each chapter, and as a result, the narrative seems ready to move and breathe, to draw the reader along not out of pragmatic curiosity (what little challenge will the boys tackle next?) but surprise and suspense (what will become of Ralph?). The cliffhanger inaugurates a new discursive mode, literally setting the narrative in motion.195

Critics have tended to describe this transformation in the second half of the novel as a regression to colonial didacticism, but the claim is only partially correct. Susan Naramore Maher reads the movement from the first to the second half of the novel as a shift from secular adventure to didactic calls for “further missions in the South Seas.” As Maher puts it, “All the romance of boys deserted on an island runs aground once Ballantyne pursues a contemporary issue, Christianizing the heathen.” Martine Hennard Dutheil likewise notes a move from romantic adventure to colonial mission, such that, in the second half of the novel, “adventure can no longer be divorced from colonial history.” And David Agruss reads the stylistic discontinuity between the two halves of the novel as a symptom of the ideological contradiction inherent in the attempt to “bridge the gap between going native” (as depicted in the first half the novel), and “going metropolitan” – his term for the “civilizing” thrust that becomes dominant in the second half. While all three are right to point out the stylistic split in the novel, it surprises me that they associate the earlier, flatter section with adventure, and the latter with didacticism. If the clichés of the colonial imaginary are more central to the latter half of the novel, it is only because it is at this point that we encounter a narrative that can make use of them. Certainly, the narrative tropes that will be taken up by adventure fiction in the wake of The Coral Island better resemble what we see in the second half of the novel than the first. See Susan Naramore Maher, “Recasting Crusoe: Frederick Marryat, R. M. Ballantyne and the Nineteenth-Century Robinsonade,” Children’s Literature Association Quarterly 13.4 (Winter 1988): 173; Martine Hennard Dutheil, “The Representation of the Cannibal in Ballantyne’s The Coral Island: Colonial Anxieties in Victorian Popular Fiction,” College Literature 28.1 (Winter 2001), 109; David Agruss, “Boys Gone Wild: Island Stranding,
And what is at risk in this new mode is the essentially static, domestic harmony the boys have been enjoying thus far. If, aboard the pirate ship, Ralph trades his island isolation for more directed movement, the ultimate goal of this movement is a return to the norm, a re-establishment of the stable idyll that has been interrupted. For Ralph’s time with the pirates serves not to complicate, but to reinforce the absolute historical divide between English and Fijian communities, and to stress the necessity of staying on the right side of that divide. The cliffhanger restores the status quo by nudging it ever so slightly.

We quickly learn that the pirates are sandalwood traders, voyaging along the Fijian islands in search of new cargo. But their principle of trade is an exaggerated version of imperial capitalism: “she trades when she can’t take by force, but she takes by force, when she can, in preference” (176). After earning the respect of the crew by defiantly standing up to the captain, Ralph befriends Bloody Bill, a melancholic pirate who subsequently serves as Ralph’s worldly mentor. In his conversations with Ralph, Bloody Bill articulates the larger, imperial historical vision of the novel. For if the pirates represent a kind white savagery or undisciplined cruelty, they are, nonetheless on the right side of an absolute historical distinction, for they are not cannibals. Even as Bloody Bill bemoans the uncouth behavior of his comrades, the conscience-struck pirate cautions Ralph not to attempt to flee the ship, for if he were to be caught by islanders, “you would find that you had jumped out of the fryin’ pan into the fire.” In an impassioned rant against the imagined protests of “soft-hearted folk at home,” in England – “sick born drivellin’ won’t-believers” who will not look a “fact” in the face – Bill declares

The Feejee islanders eat not only their enemies but one another; and they do it not for spite, but for pleasure. It’s a fact that they prefer human flesh to any other... I’ve been a good while in them parts, and I’ve visited the different groups of islands oftentimes as a trader...One o’ the laws o’ the country is, that every shipwrecked person who happens to be cast ashore, be he dead or alive, is doomed to be roasted and eaten. There was a small tradin’ schooner wrecked off one of these islands when we were lyin’ there in harbour during a storm. The crew was lost, all but three men, who swam ashore. The moment they landed our crew was small, and if we had gone ashore they would likely have killed us all. We never saw the three men again; but we heard frightful yelling, and dancing, and merrymaking that night; and one of the natives, who came aboard to trade with us next day, told us that the long pigs, as he called the men, had been roasted and eaten, and their bones were to be converted into sail needles. (180)

As Patrick Brantlinger has written, the threat of cannibalism played a crucial role in the imagination of empire. In the Victorian imperial imaginary, cannibalism represented “the absolute nadir of human behavior,” something “practiced by black or brown savages but not by white Christians, who are horrified by it.”196 Bloody Bill’s speech depicts cannibalism in just such terms: an unthinkably savage practice, something so terrible, the “drivellin’ won’t-believers” of the civilized world refuse to imagine it even possible.


196 Brantlinger, Taming Cannibals, 2-3.
But as Brantlinger shows, alongside instinctive aversion for the practice, the imperial discourse of cannibalism had an historical undercurrent as well. Cannibalism was also understood as a custom that, by its own logic, augured the decline of primitive societies. Because cannibals consumed themselves, the thinking went, their cultures were slated for extinction, sooner or later. Cannibalism functioned as a key node in what Brantlinger has identified as “extinction discourse,” a discursive formation that provided common ground for European and white American “humanitarians, missionaries, scientists, government officials, explorers, colonists, soldiers, journalists, novelists, and poets,” all of whom were “in basic agreement about the inevitable disappearance of some or all primitive races.”197 As Brantlinger has argued over the course of several books on the British imperial imagination, cannibalism (along with incessant warfare, infanticide, human sacrifice, etc.) figured prominently in this discourse because it efficiently consolidated a narrative about the decline and extinction of “savage” societies, which were understood as “self-extinguishing.”198

Because, as deployed within extinction discourse, cannibalism suggested an internal propensity towards extinction, it was seen as expressing deeper, race-determined proclivities that doomed some races worldwide to backwardness and decline. But this notion of primitive decline must be grasped as an historical ideology – an understanding of historical change – buttressing the expansion of empire in the form of colonial trade and missionary outreach. Distinguishing between communities on the basis of their historical trajectories – identifying some societies as declining and others progressing – was crucial to the humanitarian justification of Britain’s dominion, because the imperial understanding of cannibalism encoded an historical vision that rendered Britain’s rule morally necessary. Bloody Bill makes such a claim implicitly when, after cautioning Ralph about the threat of cannibalism in Fiji, he notes that were they in Tahiti, Ralph might “run away there well enough, because the natives are all Christians; an’ we find that wherever the savages take up with Christianity they always give over their bloody ways, and are safe to be trusted” (181).

The rest of the novel affirms Bloody Bill’s experience of missionary intervention. Ralph soon encounters traders and missionaries engaged with the political struggles of different island communities – struggles revolving around traditions and rituals that give a sense of the historical changes these communities are undergoing as a result of the appearance of English missionaries. We come to learn the backstory of Avatea and Tararo, for example – the islanders the boys first encountered following the flash of violence at the novel’s mid-point. Tararo has offered Avatea as a bride to the leader of a neighboring tribe, but Avatea refuses to marry the chief, because she has been converted to Christianity by missionaries, and is already betrothed to another saved man. When she resists Tararo’s proposed match, he gives her an ultimatum: either she marries the chief, or he will sacrifice her in a cannibalistic ritual, in accordance with tribal custom. This crisis drives the last section of the novel. In another surge of chivalric heroism, the boys attempt to save Avatea, for “she was a woman in distress, and that was enough to secure to her the aid of a Christian man” (276). This time, however, the rescue fails, and the boys are themselves taken captive and sentenced to death by Tararo. Only a well-timed visit from missionaries, who convert Tararo and his people to Christianity, secures the release of

198 Ibid., 2.
Avatea and the boys. With Tararo and his people saved, and Avatea restored to her fiancé, the boys finally depart for England as the novel comes to a close.

Though of course mediated through Ralph’s youthful perspective, what is revealed here is a community under direct pressure to transform – a Fijian world submitting to the modernizing forces of global trade and Christian conversion. Of course, the sense of history that the novel’s attention to native customs implies is reflective of a more sinister imperial logic, in which uncivilized racial others dwell in an essentially static world, awaiting the Christian salvation and “development” that would grant them access to history. This is what Johannes Fabian famously defined as the “denial of coevalness” – the ethnographic imposition of temporal distance between the present of the observer and the timeless past of the observed, a seemingly neutral descriptive move that in fact relegates the observed community to a pre-modern primitive age, lacking discernible history.¹⁹⁹ Patrick Brantlinger sees this as a staple of the Victorian imperial mindset, because observing a “temporal hierarchy or limit – assigning primitive races to a futureless past – reinforced the vertical, spatial hierarchy” of empire.²⁰⁰ As Lukács would put it, it is the hierarchy made possible by substituting race for class to explain historical change.

But the denial of coevalness – the relegation of the islanders to a timeless, primitive age, outside of modern historical time – wrenches our modern English subjects out of history as well, by placing them at the end of it. The Coral Island centers the imperial temporal hierarchy in which a-historical subjects encounter each other from different ends of the historical spectrum: before history on the one hand, and after it on the other. What adventure comes to offer, in this sense, is the chance for the modern, post-historical subject to participate in a process of historical development that has become unavailable at home, because the modern nation has already reached its historical end. The attraction of the imperial romance is the promise of re-entering history by means of racial subjugation, a promise that depends upon the idea that racial difference signifies historical difference. Early in the novel, Peterkin remarks that “We've got an island all to ourselves. We'll take possession in the name of the king; we'll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course we'll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries” (14-15). Though Peterkin’s hopes do not come to fruition (the boys are in fact captured and sentenced to death), his sentiment is nonetheless borne out. Following the cliffhanger, we move from the flat visual description of the coral island chapters – the a-historical idyll of the travelogue – to an active narrative mode in which the boys become more purposefully engaged with the affairs of the island inhabitants’ changing world. In a reproduction of the narrative dynamism of the historical novel’s plunge into history, momentum is now generated from the conflict between distinct communities – the Fijian tribes, the European pirates, the missionaries, and the boys themselves. This conflict may be in the service of an overarching imperial project, clearly expressed in the providential ending, but it is, nonetheless, reflective of the dominant ideology of history in the period.


²⁰⁰ Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 2.
Unlike many of his peers, Robert Louis Stevenson makes little use of menacing racial others to drive plots or generate a sense of danger in his adventure stories. Instead, threats of violence in Stevenson generally come from white villains who, in different ways, represent the forces and effects of modernization – displaced heirs, religious fanatics, unscrupulous merchants, etc. If island cannibals are casually evoked here and there in Stevenson, it is to gesture at the points where his stories diverge from their generic coordinates. Again and again, Stevenson produces European fanatics to precipitate the violent convulsions at the heart of his stories. These villains are diverse, and do not hew to a single type, but they collectively capture the complexity of modern systems colliding haphazardly with residual communities, practices, and manners. Some of these menacing figures are charismatic, others repulsive, and some, like Long John Silver, dangerously dynamic – all too willing to adapt to meet the demands of shifting circumstances. But this changeability is not the rule for Stevenson’s villains: both the religious fanatic Attwater in *The Ebb-Tide* and the vengeful James Durrisdeer in *The Master of Ballantrae* are monomaniacally fixated on their goals. These are demonic figures, with the unwavering focus of Madame Defarge. Occasionally, such figures are exposed as frauds, their power dependent on tricks and superstition, as in *The Beach of Falesá*, where the merchant Case is able to secure exclusive trading rights with the island’s native population by fashioning himself a supernatural being by means of luminous paint, an Aeolian harp, and vague talk of devilry. Stevenson suggests that the impulses underlying such ruthlessness are not exclusive to imperial others, but emanate instead from the figures and forces heralding modernization.

Stevenson represents a sharp contrast to other adventure writers of the period in his refusal to use racial others to animate his plots or effect his heroes’ moral development. But in other respects, he hews much closer to the norms of the genre, and I will explore here some of ways he aligns his work with his precursors, while at the same time working to distinguish himself from them, particularly at the level of what I have been calling historical vision. Taking up the raw materials of adventure, Stevenson brushes against the ideology of history that, in Ballantyne and others, achieves its clearest expression in the encounters between young white adventurers and savage islanders. If, as Martin Green argues, adventure tales are “the energizing myth of English imperialism” – the stories that “charge England’s will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer, and rule”201 – Stevenson seems to offer an alternative, a means of imagining adventure’s interest lying elsewhere, beyond the imperial project. Some of his islands, like Ballantyne’s, may stand outside the current of human history, but for Stevenson, this strange isolation is the very horizon of the genre – the treasure it seeks to discover – and not simply, as in Ballantyne, its enabling condition.

In other words, Stevenson works through the tropes of adventure at the level of their underlying historical logic. As Green points out, Stevenson understood himself to be working as much in the vein of Scott as Defoe, and this is clear from his evident glee in taking opportunities to make the historical world of his tale palpable.202 So if one major staple of adventure – the menacing racial other – is conspicuously missing in Stevenson, it may be because he grasps the function of such encounters with respect to the genre’s larger historical implications. And as much as is possible in the late-Victorian period, Stevenson explores these historical implications.

202 Ibid., 228
in other aspects of his tales, engaging adventure’s pervasive sense of historical stasis not as a clash between communities (figuring some social groups as developed and others as stunted), but rather by rendering this registering this conflict everywhere. Most notably, the sense of stasis or inertia is manifest in the trajectory of the protagonist himself, whose mobility and changeability is in many ways his defining feature, his value. To bring this into focus, I will take up *Treasure Island*. For, if *Kidnapped* and *The Master of Ballantrae* represent more direct responses to the influence of Scott, it is in *Treasure Island*, his first novel-length tale, that Stevenson responds specifically to the sort of adventure fiction popularized by Ballantyne.

Stevenson explicitly aligns his work with Ballantyne’s, evoking him (as well as W. H. G. Kingston and James Fenimore Cooper) in his verse apostrophe to “The Hesitating Purchaser.” This nod was not simply a marketing effort, meant to league the author’s debut with existing popular works; *The Coral Island* informs *Treasure Island* throughout, acting as a source for many of its key scenes and themes. Again and again in the novel, Stevenson draws directly from Ballantyne, going so far as to reproduce Ralph Rover’s more triumphant moments. Although the more domestic scenes of Ralph’s Crusoe-like island sojourn are cut (displaced onto Ben Gunn, the marooned pirate), in many other respects, Jim Hawkins relives Ralph’s journey. Yet Stevenson’s echoes of Ballantyne have a persistently sinister ring to them. Stripped of Ballantyne’s moral clarity and imperial triumphalism, *Treasure Island* registers a more conflicted sense of the kind of developmental story adventure fiction can tell.

One place this conflict manifests itself is in Stevenson’s satirical take on the Crusoe myth that comprises the first half of Ballantyne’s novel. Stevenson smuggles the story of the marooned European into the novel sideways, in the person of Ben Gunn – a slightly insane figure who seems to hew closer to Defoe’s original model (the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk), than to Crusoe himself. Generally speaking, in popular versions of the Crusoe template, the island’s emptiness and wildness functions as an opportunity to strip away the modern social system in order to naturalize that system and the values that underwrite it. The single man, alone in nature, thrives thanks to his reason, persistence, and organization. By distilling the operations of key English institutions into more abstract values of hard work, time management, and faith, the Crusoe myth recasts the economy of time and labor that subtends capitalist production as the natural response to an inhospitable world. The capacity to transform the wild emptiness of a seemingly uninhabitable world into abundance (even modest luxury!) validates these modern principles by displaying them as more or less successful. Rational production is naturalized insofar as it simply seems to work, to keep the stranded European alive, comfortable, and sane.

But in *Treasure Island* Stevenson brackets the Crusoe myth, effectively reversing its charge. Here, isolation on the island is not regenerative, but stunting – it precipitates a kind of descent to animality. When Jim first glimpses Ben Gunn, he is uncertain whether it is in fact a man he sees running through the woods and swinging from tree to tree: “What it was, whether

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203 The second stanza reads:

“—So be it, and fall on! If not,
If studious youth no longer crave,
His ancient appetites forgot,
Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,
Or Cooper of the wood and wave:
So be it, also? And may I
And all my pirates share the grave
Where these and their creations lie!”
bear or man or monkey, I could in no wise tell.” The animal descriptors continue as the “lurking nondescript” pursues Jim -- “the creature flitted like a deer, running manlike on two legs, but unlike any man that I had ever seen, stooping almost double as it ran.” This idea that Gunn is somehow no longer quite human is reinforced by Dr. Livesey, who questions his mental state: “Is this Ben Gunn a man?” he asks Jim. “A man who has been three years biting his nails on a desert island, Jim, can’t expect to appear as sane as you or me. It doesn’t lie in human nature.” In *Treasure Island*, the island isolation that affords a Crusoe (and his heir Ralph Rover) the opportunity for *Bildung* – growth, maturation, socialization – is recast as malignant, a version of purgatory that renders one less, not more fit for modern social life. This is not simply Ben Gunn’s plight either; later in *Treasure Island*, Stevenson takes more explicit aim at Ballantyne’s version of the Crusoe myth, with its three central male characters making a happy home, when the treasure hunters abandon three pirates behind, rather than carry them home to the gallows. Dr. Livesey leaves them a store of provisions, as an act of charity, but Stevenson sours his idyllic precursor: a shot that rings out across the island as the *Hispaniola* readies to depart, suggesting that this little community will not be as harmonious as Ralph’s.

In essence, Stevenson’s more skeptical take on the Crusoe myth is the result of him having more fully digested its darker implications than his Victorian peers. If, as Martin Green puts it, Ballantyne “was in some sense not taking the [Crusoe] story seriously,” by presenting “the whole experience of being shipwrecked as fun,” Stevenson presents an inverted picture of island isolation. Instead of the idyllic retreat that Ralph enjoys, Jim’s experience is harrowing. The island does not generate excitement, or wonder, but dread – “the worst dreams that I ever have,” he writes in the present tense, “are when I hear the surf booming about its coasts” (190). It is only at the novel’s outset, as Jim pores over Captain Flint’s map, that the island looks like a place he wishes to explore; as soon as he actually sees it, detached from its textual mediation, the “strange and tragic” character of the island is manifest. Even in retrospect, Jim cannot parse the oddly unsettling nature of this first sight:

> Perhaps it was the look of the island, with its grey, melancholy woods, and wild stone spires, and the surf that we could both see and hear foaming and thundering on the steep beach – at least, although the sun shone bright and hot, and the shore birds were fishing and crying all around us, and you would have thought any one would have been glad to get to land after being so long at sea, my heart sank, as the saying is, into my boots; and from that first look onward, I hated the very thought of Treasure Island. (69)

And this aversion is maintained to the very end. He signs off the novel by denouncing the treasure left behind: “The bar silver and the arms still lie, for all that I know, where Flint buried them; and certainly they shall lie there for me. Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back again to that accursed island” (190).

What is it about the island that disturbs Jim so much? The island itself is not obviously distressing, at least not in proportion to Jim’s strong feelings about it. There are no menacing natives, no wild animals, no environmental hazards (steep cliffs, quicksand, volcanoes, etc.) that would warrant such a passionate rejection of the place. Indeed, one of the things that is striking

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204 Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, 79.
205 Ibid., 102.
about *Treasure Island*, compared to other boys’ adventure tales, is that the island itself does not, in any sense, menace Jim. Even the malaria the pirates contract from camping in a bog is described not as the peril of an inhabitable climate, but as evidence of the mutineers’ stupidity. As Dr. Livesey says, the fever came of the pirates “being arrant asses…and not having sense enough to know honest air from poison, and the dry land from a vile, pestiferous slough” (165). The island is not responsible for the misfortunes that befall its visitors.

In this regard, Stevenson departs from Ballantyne’s model, but in others, he hews more closely to it. Yet even in his more faithful reproductions of episodes taken from Ballantyne, Stevenson qualifies and complicates them in ways worth tracking. For example, much like *The Coral Island* and most other adventure stories, *Treasure Island* is narrated in retrospect by the protagonist. Writing at the behest of Dr. Livesey and Squire Trelawney – the respectable gentlemen with whom he sails – Jim takes up his pen “in the year of grace 17—” to tell “the whole particulars…from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted” (3). In this first sentence, we find significant overlap with and divergence from other adventures: unlike Ballantyne, Stevenson places his tale in the previous century, a maritime world controlled not only by British naval power, but by the triangular slave trade. And though Jim holds back the bearings of the island, lest his readers set out to snatch the remaining treasure (Jim gives us no indication of the publishing venue through which his readers might encounter his narrative, instead sticking to the broader convention, borrowed from Sensation fiction, of an editorial collection of personal narratives for private use), it becomes clear that this is an Atlantic tale, unlike *The Coral Island*’s Pacific. The coordinates we do eventually glean place the island somewhere in the Caribbean, within reach of both Caracas (where the treasure-hunters land following their adventure), and Tortuga, a renowned gathering place for pirates and illicit traders off the northern coast of French Saint Domingue (modern Haiti).

Jim’s travels thus take place not in the nineteenth-century world of Pacific colonialism and missionary expansion, but rather the eighteenth-century world of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Long John Silver is the figure most closely tied to the world of slave trading, with his “negress” wife and tales of “Corso Castle,” a Gold Coast slave castle (located in modern day Ghana) that served as the major African hub of the British slave trade in the story’s recent past. Silver also mentions serving with Bartholomew Roberts (later known as “Black Bart,” perhaps the most successful pirate of the so-called “Golden Age” of piracy) aboard the *Royal Fortune*. One of Roberts’s more infamous acts during this time was the sinking of a slave ship with some eighty Africans on board, all of whom (still in chains) died. Such attacks represented a serious menace to the British slave trade, and following Roberts’s death and the execution of his crew (which Silver mentions in passing when he notes that the man who “ampytated” his leg “was hanged like a dog, and sun-dried like the rest, at Corso Castle”), the British investment in Gold Coast slaving was significantly more secure (57). As Marcus Rediker shows, the British exportation of slaves from these areas nearly doubled in the 1720s, primarily as a result of removing the threat of Roberts.207 Thus, though race itself does not factor prominently in the island adventure, it is by no means written out of *Treasure Island*. Rather, it is the foundation of the invisible economic infrastructure of the novel’s world.

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How does Jim encounter this world, and how does he fare in it? Much like Ralph’s departure for the Pacific in *The Coral Island*, Jim’s movement abroad is pretty lightly motivated; for Jim, the treasure appears as almost an afterthought to the prospect of leaving home. In *The Coral Island*, Ralph’s departure is motivated when his interest in the Fijian islands is piqued by stories of the South Seas – exotic tales of beautiful coral formations, year-round sun, and “bloodthirsty savages” (5). To convince his parents to let him set out for the Pacific, Ralph explains to his father that, in order for him to become a successful seaman, he must of course gain experience at sea. No time like the present, he argues. Ralph’s adventure may be a lark, then, but it is also rationalized – in order to enter his chosen profession, Ralph must adventure. Promising his mother that he will read a chapter from his bible every day, Ralph’s journey is framed from the start as a formative experience that will prepare him for productive, adult life.

But Stevenson drops this feint towards the voyage as a species of professional development, and in the process, marks a more fundamental continuity between the youthful lust for adventure and the adult pursuit of wealth. In *Treasure Island*, there is no separation between the two, no developmental logic that will transform Jim from his youthful self to some more fully realized adult figure (like, say, Dr. Livesey). Rather, the adults in *Treasure Island* are themselves childlike – the pirates are repeatedly referred to in infantilizing terms, and Squire Trelawney often exhibits the same behavior. The lack of any clear line from child to adult is signaled early in the novel, in Jim’s relation to his family. Unlike Ralph, Jim’s relation with his family is muted, even cold. Where, over the course of his journeys, Ralph reminds us again and again how he misses his mother, Jim’s interactions with his family early in the novel are deeply ambivalent. Briefly mentioning that his father has died, Jim passes over the event in a single sentence, confessing only that he was “full of sad thoughts about my father” (18). Soon after, following Billy Bones’s death, Jim’s mother rifles through Bill’s possessions to extract what she is owed by her lodger. But because his capital is made up of currencies from all around the world (foreshadowing the exotic mix of coinage in Flint’s treasure), she is unable to compute the debt. In her effort to avoid over- or undercharging the dead man, Mrs. Hawkins dallies, exposing them to capture by the very pirates whose appearance provoked Bill’s death in the first place. Jim curses his mother’s shallow fastidiousness: “how I blamed my poor mother for her honesty and her greed, for her past foolhardiness and present weakness!” (24). This is a more layered parent-child relation than anything we find in Ballantyne. Already here, Jim is disappointed by the previous generation; he seems to scorn his mother’s straightforward accounting – she is too greedy to make do with less, and not greedy enough to simply take advantage of the circumstances. It is as though Jim is already more worldly than his mother.

Jim’s frustration with his mother’s incapacity to distinguish between different orders of value – to measure the small sin of taking more than she is owed against the real danger of being captured by villains – will later rebound back on him in the form of Long John Silver, whose instinct for self-preservation disgusts Jim. In a sense, Silver represents the faculty of discernment that Jim’s mother lacks, but taken to the extreme. And Silver’s influence on Jim points to a greater moral ambiguity in *Treasure Island* that further distinguishes Stevenson’s novel from his precursor’s. For although, in certain respects Jim, like Ralph, serves as the moral compass for the story he narrates, Jim’s moral sensibilities are far less clear-cut than Ralph’s.

Compare two strikingly similar scenes, in which the boy protagonists of both novels single-handedly pilot stolen ships with the help of wounded pirates. In both novels, these intimate dialogue between a wounded pirate (a product of a malignant social world and the figure of stalled, thwarted, or incomplete Bildung) and the young hero (pure potential) broach the
idea of conversion: on the one hand, the Christian boy cautions the sinful man to repent his sins; on the other, the harsh worldview of the pirate – the product of some brutal experience of competition – represents a form of unsentimental maturity that the boy must achieve in order to survive in the ruthless maritime world. But the differences between Ballantyne and Stevenson’s use of the trope demonstrate their ideological divergence and provide insight into Stevenson’s more capacious vision of adventure’s capacity to represent historical change.

As we have seen, The Coral Island offers doses of “worldly” pragmatism about island cannibals, throughout. These warnings are most explicit when articulated by Bloody Bill, whose comments about the threat of cannibals (occupying all the Fijian islands not yet visited by European missionaries), are validated in the novel when Bill’s crew (Ralph included) are set upon by angry natives. Of the entire pirate crew, only Ralph and Bill escape. Bill is fatally wounded in the pursuit, and as Ralph sails the ship single-handedly (following Bill’s instructions), Bill laments the terrible life he has lived. To ease his pain, Ralph tries to comfort him by exhorting him to “only believe” in Christ, and “Though your sins be red like crimson, they shall be white as snow” (216). It is unclear whether Bill actually does believe (he dies moments later), and this saves Ballantyne from broaching the messier issue of whether we ought to regard the pirate’s soul as saved, but the episode nonetheless concretizes Ballantyne’s stark morality by locating, in Christianity, an intersection between Ralph’s familiar, domestic morality (his Christianity, associated with the nurturing influence of his mother, evoked again and again), and Bill’s more worldly pragmatism, in which men are capable of cannibalism and are conquerable only by Christian missionaries. When, at the end of the novel, Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin are saved from cannibals by missionaries, both Bill and Ralph’s moral systems are validated. Ralph’s Christianity, moreover, is cast as all the more real, all the more vital, for its exposure to the uglier truth that Bill articulates. Christianity truly is what saves Ralph from a horrible death.

But when this conversion episode is replayed in Treasure Island, it takes on a far less triumphant aspect. After stealing the Hispaniola, Jim finds himself alone on deck with Israel Hands, who has been wounded in a drunken fight with another pirate – the “rank Irlender” O’Brien, whom Hands murders just before Jim boards the ship. Hands, like the rest of the pirates, represents a barely muted or internalized form of the unchecked consumption that appears in the form of outright cannibalism in Ballantyne. Excess appetite and thirst precipitates the fight between Hands and O’Brien, and as the ensuing dialogue between Hands and Jim reveals, Hands casts men eating one other as the underlying condition of adult life.

In exchange for food and wine, Hands teaches Jim to steer the ship to safety, but in the process, Jim realizes Hands is looking for an opportunity to strike: “All the time he kept smiling, and putting his tongue out in the most guilty, embarrassed manner, so that a child could have told that he was bent on some deception” (137). In a somewhat sinister echo of The Coral Island, Jim then advises Hands to “go to his prayers, like a Christian man,” but Hands only responds, “I never seen good come o’ goodness yet. Him as strikes first is my fancy; dead men don’t bite; them’s my views – amen, so be it” (138). Dead men don’t bite, but living men do, and as soon as Jim gets the ship to harbor, Hands lunges at him with a knife. Jim is able to dodge behind the mast, but a pursuit quickly pursues. Just as Ralph draws on his childhood Christian teaching to soothe his wounded pirate, Jim reaches back to his childhood to deal with Hands, as well. But it is not to comfort Hands, but to avoid him, and it is the experience of play that saves him: “It was such a game as I had often played at home about the rocks of Black Hill Cove; but never before, you may be sure, with such a wildly beating heart as now” (141). Thanks to his youthful speed
and dexterity, just when Hands lunges at him, Jim climbs up the mast. As Hands climbs after him, Jim warns him: “One more step... and I’ll blow your brains out! Dead men don’t bite, you know” (142). Hands hurls his knife at Jim, pinning him to the mast, but Jim fires immediately back, and Hands falls into the water as the chapter comes to a close.

Note how far this scene diverges from Bloody Bill’s sentimental death in The Coral Island, despite the nearly identical template. Not only is the pirate unrepentant, but far from being tempered by the civilizing influence of the Christian protagonist, he in fact compels Jim to violence – Jim emerges from this exchange a killer, albeit one who acts in self-defense. And even before Jim takes the fatal shot, he evokes Christianity only ironically, not with any sincere regard for Hands’s salvation, but as a taunt – a display of his own power in the situation. You had better say your prayers, for you are dying, and I will do nothing to save you. In essence, the conversion that takes place in this chapter is not a Christian one, but a piratical one – Jim repeats Hands’s own mantra back to him (“dead men don’t bite”), just before shooting him. If, going forward, Jim retains his function as the novel’s moral center, we now have a firmer sense of what it must accommodate, what kinds of compromises survival in this world will require. We are a long way from the Sunday school morality of Ballantyne. It isn’t so much that Stevenson is completely rejecting the spectacles of violence or cannibalism that animate a novel like The Coral Island as he is turning them inwards: Christianity does not save in Treasure Island; only a willingness to bite does.

It is fair to say, then, that Stevenson significantly complicates many of the adventure genre’s bolder expressions of imperial ideology. We find no menacing racial others here, no stark moral divisions, and no simplistic defenses of imperial expansion and missionary conversion. His descriptions do not follow the natural history impulse of Ballantyne.208 (Indeed, it has been observed that the book’s natural scenery matches the Northern Californian coast more than anything in the Caribbean.) And the perils Jim encounters on the island are imported, internal to the social system of the Hispaniola itself. There are no violent storms, no dangerous animals, no true environmental hazards – rather, the trials that beset the principle characters and make up the contours of the adventure are all crystallized in the mutiny plot that breaks the ship into warring groups. Treasure Island is thus ultimately less a story about islands or treasure-hunting than about mutiny – about the internal splintering of a purportedly unified community into antagonistic factions. “And to think that they’re all Englishmen!” Squire Trelawney exclaims, after learning of the plot (66). Differences within a single people, not between. In this respect, Stevenson seems to recognize (and lay bare) the unstated conceit of much adventure fiction – that, by virtue of its isolation and existence outside human history, an island is an ideal space upon which to project the fantasies and anxieties of home. Much like the strange costumes and manners of the historical fiction of the period, the exotic landscapes of adventure fiction’s many treasure islands signal something alien and different. But these islands are all interior spaces – not new worlds, out there, but familiar ones, in here.

Still, if Stevenson largely rejects the ideological project of adventure in the vein of Ballantyne, he retains at least one staple of its narrative template: the frequent use of cliffhangers. The novel’s most memorable scene, when Jim finds himself trapped in the apple

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208 A sample: “The place was entirely land-locked, buried in woods, the trees coming right down to high-water mark, the shores mostly flat, and the hills standing round at a distance in a sort of amphitheatre, one here, one there. Two little rivers, or, rather, two swamps, emptied out into this pond, as you might call it; and the foliage round that part of the shore had a kind of poisonous brightness” (70). It is as though Jim is sketching a chart for a military maneuver.
barrel aboard the *Hispaniola*, accidentally eavesdropping on Long John Silver as he reveals his plan to mutiny, is a case in point. The scene is introduced with a fantastic cliffhanger, crescendoing right into the chapter break:

In I got bodily into the apple barrel, and found there was scarce an apple left; but, sitting down there in the dark, what with the sound of the waters and the rocking movement of the ship, I had either fallen asleep, or was on the point of doing so, when a heavy man sat down with rather a clash close by. The barrel shook as he leaned his shoulders against it, and I was just about to jump up when the man began to speak. It was Silver’s voice, and, before I had heard a dozen words, I would not have shown myself for all the world, but lay there, trembling and listening, in the extreme of fear and curiosity; for from these dozen words I understood that the lives of all the honest men aboard depended upon me alone. (56)

In the first sentence of the next chapter, Silver’s first dozen words reveal that he served as Quartermaster to the pirate Captain Flint, whose treasure Jim’s friends are seeking. Like Stevenson’s cliffhangers in general, then, this one is continuous (no spatial pivot or temporal gap, thanks to the first-person narration) and consistent (the impression of crisis is not generated by the placement of the discursive cut). If he uses them liberally, Stevenson nonetheless takes his cliffhangers seriously.

But strikes me as notable about this example, and about Stevenson’s cliffhangers in general, is its orientation towards the event that motivates it. Notice how mindful Jim is of his accounting – only a dozen words more, and the danger becomes clear. This begs the question (a question that all cliffhangers pose): if only a dozen words are necessary to realize the threat (Silver’s mutiny plot), why delay? Aside from compelling the reader to turn the page (or buy the next installment), what is gained by placing these dozen words – a few seconds of diegetic time – across the discursive divide? It is essentially a tease, providing a glimpse of the future (in the form of Jim’s summary of what he gleans from Silver’s conversation), without actually disclosing the contents of that future. In this sense, we might say that the cliffhanger arrives particularly early.

Of course, all cliffhangers arrive early (they are cliffhangers because they arrive early), but here the narrative event has barely even begun when the break intervenes. In the examples we have surveyed so far, cliffhangers interrupt events in process: a pirate grabs Ralph Rover, the massive stone door closes, sealing Allan Quartermain in King Solomon’s treasure room, etc. The discursive cut arrives in the midst of some unfolding event, and the placement of the cut frames the event in a way that suggests it will continue to unfold in the “wrong” way. The cliffhanger effect is tied to the sense that the “bad” ending is all-too-proximate, indeed, that it is inevitable. Here, by contrast, Jim’s narration slips beyond the present diegetic moment to peek ever so slightly into the future, and without providing any detail, Jim gives a brief (and shocking) summary of the conversation that ensues, just enough to hook the reader.

As I argued at the outset, in adventure fiction, the cliffhanger is often charged with compensating for a more fundamental sense of stasis in the narrative system. Because little about the shape of the story is subject to legitimate change, the cliffhanger is required to threaten the
equilibrium – to expose the characters to some danger that might produce a turn, an alternative trajectory for the story. But because of the larger developmental stasis of the worlds in which these stories are set, these twists can only ever function as distractions or temporary hurdles on the way to a conclusion known in advance. In their weak attempts to complicate a sense of narrative inevitability, they ultimately circumscribe the narrative’s horizon, reducing its reach to the fortunes of the protagonist. And thus, because of both the prevailing conventions of the genre and the ideology of history that the genre tends to promulgate, cliffhangers that threaten the global shape of the narrative (and particularly the life of the protagonist) cannot help but come off as empty threats, disclosing a more fundamental stasis even as they pretend to challenge it. And since, like his peers in the genre, Stevenson uses a retrospective first-person narrator, his cliffhangers suffer from a similar sense of futility or stasis. Threats to the protagonist can only ever be feints, and thus the reach of the crises punctuated by his cliffhangers is constrained.

But to his credit, Stevenson tries to resist this inertia by employing cliffhangers in a consistently future-oriented key, repeatedly using the device to generate surprise, rather than suspense. For example, soon after learning Silver’s plan in the apple barrel, Jim witnesses Silver murdering a sailor who refuses to join his band of mutineers. Jim sprints away through the forest, until “a fresh alarm brought me to a standstill with a thumping heart” (78). What is the “fresh alarm” that brings Jim to a standstill? We will have to read the next chapter to find out. Soon after, the same tactic appears again: Jim hears the sounds of gunshot across the island; when he rushes to the shore to see what is happening, “not a quarter of a mile in front of me, I beheld the Union Jack flutter in the air above a wood” (84). Why is the Union Jack flying? Again, we really can’t say, from where we stand, because at the point the cut arrives, these are events that the reader has no insight into. We anticipate some change, but the cliffhanger does not grant us the means to inhabit or analyze that change. These cliffhangers activate surprise and curiosity – the shock of the new, the desire to witness how some change will affect the existing status quo – rather than suspense. Suspense depends entirely on the development of an existing state of affairs, on the difficulty of tracing familiar lines of action past apparent obstructions or blockages. What will Ralph do, now that he is in the clutches of a pirate? How will Quartermain escape the tomb he is trapped in? These are cliffhangers that draw on the reader’s knowledge of the narrative past to shape our understanding of an apparently imminent future. But Stevenson rejects this more suspenseful form in favor of the teaser – the promise that the narrative trajectory will be significantly altered by the introduction of some new set of circumstances, in ways we cannot yet anticipate.

It is as though Stevenson senses the underlying inertia that nullifies the larger effects of adventure’s suspenseful cliffhangers, and attempts to avoid that inertia by looking concertedly ahead, insisting on the possibility of change within the narrative. But in the process, he sacrifices the cliffhanger’s grounding in the unfolding of a crisis – its crucial relation to Kairos – and its capacity to isolate moments of possibility that develop out of longer processes. That is, in his attempt to resist the larger narrative stasis of the genre, Stevenson cuts out its developmental logic, leaving us instead with a narrative that highlights movement and diversion, shifts and cuts. And this emphasis on the narrative swerve – on lifting off from present conditions to veer in a new direction – comes into starker focus when one notices how many of these cliffhangers feature Jim in various states of paralysis: trapped in the apple-barrel, brought up short after fleeing Silver, pinned to the mast by Israel Hands’s knife, etc. For all the ways Stevenson resists the underlying limitations of adventure fiction as an apology for empire, his cliffhangers, nonetheless, are bound by a similar narrative restlessness.
Of course, Stevenson’s writings are not confined to a single imperial moment, to the Atlantic or the eighteenth century. He ventures into the more contemporary waters of late-nineteenth century Pacific trade as well. One such venture, *The Wrecker*, is perhaps Stevenson’s most trenchant rebuke of the sort of imperial piety we have been tracking in Ballantyne and adventure fiction more broadly. The novel ranges across the old and new worlds with verve, but as it progresses it gravitates towards a mysterious ship lying wrecked on Midway Island, located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, between Hawaii and Japan. The lure of this obscure place is a speculation: narrator Loudon Dodd and his partner Jim Pinkerton have bid on the ship at an auction in San Francisco, with the intention of stripping it and selling it for parts. They expect to pay a tiny sum – no more than $1,000, but as the auction gets underway, another agent bids the price up to $50,000, an outrageous price that far exceeds what anyone imagines it could be worth. But the very excess leads Dodd and Pinkerton to suspect the wreck must have been carrying smuggled goods – perhaps opium. Since the ship is worth so much to someone else (and presumably someone in the know), Dodd and Pinkerton keep pace and offer the winning bid. But once he actually arrives at the wreck, Dodd is astonished to find that the ship contains neither valuable cargo nor hidden opium – it is nothing but a wrecked, empty ship, essentially worthless.

Financially ruined, Dodd’s curiosity leads him to track down the other bidder to get to the bottom of the ship’s inflated price. Eventually he finds Norris Carthew, who turns out to be the man behind both the wreck and the auction. The vagabond son of an aristocratic English family, Carthew, we learn, decided to enter into trade to make his way in the world. After making a lucky deal worth two thousand pounds on his first cargo, Carthew and his crew meet some bad luck when their ship – long in disrepair – is dismasted off of Midway Island. After many days, an American vessel arrives and offers passage to San Francisco. But the captain of that ship demands their entire capital – all two thousand pounds – in exchange. Provoked by this extortion, one of Carthew’s crewmembers impulsively lashes out with his knife, slashing the captain and killing him instantly. The captain’s first mate retaliates, and the violence instantly escalates, with Carthew and his crew eventually killing the entire crew of the American ship in horrific, methodical fashion. Mere days later, a naval cruiser appears on the horizon, and in an attempt to cover up the crime, Carthew’s crew decides to adopt the identities of their victims. After arriving in San Francisco, in a further attempt to bury the crime, Carthew sends an agent to the auction, to buy his wrecked ship so that no one else has a chance to examine the scene of the crime and connect the dots. But because of Dodd and Pinkerton’s involvement, this plan goes awry, and as layer upon layer of fraud, cover-up, and speculation are piled up, the horrific outburst of violence on the island expands to account for the financial and social ruin of almost all the principle characters in the novel. As if in rebuke of the sensational stories of island cannibalism found in Ballantyne and others, the tropical island where all goes wrong is uninhabited. No island savages are summoned to scare readers here: the grim slaughter we witness is simply an instinctive response to a vulgar attempt at price-gouging – supply and demand in its simplest form. It is as canny an indictment of the global circulation of capital as one finds in late-century fiction.
*The Wrecker* is a remarkable novel, imperceptibly creeping into more and more sobering registers as Dodd unveils the shockingly empty secret at the end. Shifting attention away from many of the more familiar adventure tropes we have seen, *The Wrecker* lays claim to a wider range of representational possibilities borrowed directly from urban genres and practices (like the detective story, stock market speculation, metropolitan *flaneurie*, arts and amusement satire, etc.) – genres that cast the global system of trade and speculation in a more somber light. And throughout the entire novel, there is hardly a cliffhanger in sight.
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