# The Secret of Immediacy: Dickens' Debt to the Tale of Terror in *Blackwood's*

HARVEY PETER SUCKSMITH



SINCE IMMEDIACY goes far toward explaining the remarkable power of Dickens' narrative, its secret is worth investigating. Dickens' practice of piling up concrete details partly accounts for his success here, but he also achieves a strong impression of immediacy by appealing to the reader's senses. The Dickens world appears sensuous and tangible because it is evoked either directly through the reader's own memory images of sensations, a reflection of the manner in which he apprehends the real world, or indirectly through the sense impressions of a character with whom he is invited to identify himself. What ensures the final success of this method, however, is the intensity with which the sense impressions are presented; it is a case of unity of effect, the practical result of which is a powerful immediacy.

Dickens may be correctly described as a "sensation novelist" but the term should be given a wider meaning than Walter C. Phillips gives it in his study of Dickens, Reade, and Collins;[1] a meaning

Harvey Peter Sucksmith is Senior Lecturer in English, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.

Throughout these notes, I have used the following abbreviations for works frequently cited:

*L* *The Letters of Charles Dickens: 1820–1839,* ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1965).

*SB* *Sketches by Boz,* New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London, 1957).

*PP* *Pickwick Papers,* New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London, 1948).

*OT* *Oliver Twist,* New Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London, 1949).

1. *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* (New York, 1919).

closer to Conrad's is more applicable in the case of Dickens: "Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way. . . . All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions."[2] Even within the narrow limits in which Phillips uses the term "sensation novelist," he is mistaken, I believe, in trying to trace the development of Dickens exclusively from the Gothic tale through Byron and Bulwer-Lytton.[3] I suggest that a stronger and more important influence on Dickens may have been the series of early tales in *Blackwood's* which includes: "Buried Alive," William Maginn's "The Man in the Bell," Thomas Colley Grattan's "Confessions of an English Glutton," Henry Thomson's "Le Revenant," William Mudford's "The Iron Shroud," Samuel Ferguson's "Involuntary Experimentalist," and Samuel Warren's "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician."[4]

All these stories are tales of terror, yet what distinguishes them fundamentally from the traditional Gothic tale is a completely revolutionary technique. The Gothic tale generally arouses a purely romantic terror through vague suggestion. Even Mrs. Ann Radcliffe, who employs a certain matter-of-factness, does so in order to provide a convincing background for the Gothic *frisson* which is itself aroused through suggestion; indeed many critics regard imprecision and suggestion as the secret of Mrs. Radcliffe's art.[5] The *Blackwood's* tale, however, creates a realistic terror through precision of descriptive detail. Objects which arouse horror are described with a meticulously scientific accuracy and the sensations of horror are

2. Joseph Conrad, preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (London, 1897).

3. Phillips, pp. 152–81. This influence almost certainly explains both the name and melodramatic posturing of Monks in *OT*.

4. "Buried Alive," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* 10 (1821), 262–64; "The Man in the Bell," 10 (1821), 373–75; "Confessions of an English Glutton," 13 (1823), 86–93; "Le Revenant," 21 (1827), 409–16; "The Iron Shroud," 28 (1830), 346–71; "Involuntary Experimentalist," 42 (1837), 487–92; "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician," 28 (1830), 322–38, 474–95, 609–23, 770–93, 921–40; 29 (1831), 105–27, 361–75, 485–508, 946–67; 32 (1832), 279–99, 878–911; and 42 (1837), 248–92. I am indebted to Walter E. Houghton, Editor, *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824–1900* (Toronto, 1966), for kindly identifying the anonymous authors of these tales (other than Warren, and the author of "Buried Alive," whom I have been unable to identify), prior to the publication of vol. 1 of the *Index*.

5. These critics include Devendra P. Varma, Clara F. McIntyre, and Sir Walter Scott; see Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (London, 1957) pp. 103–4, 106–7, 113.

analyzed with an almost medical thoroughness. The powerful impression of terror produced by a certain kind of medical report had been noted in *Blackwood's* as early as 1823, and storywriters in the same journal were not slow to act on the hint.[6] The Gothic tale may make us smile today, but the *Blackwood's* tales are still compelling; I am sure the difference in method explains this fact. Edgar Allan Poe had put his finger on the secret:

> For Beauty can be better treated in the poem. Not so with terror, or passion, or horror, or a multitude of such other points. And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animadversions against those *tales of effect,* many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of Blackwood. The impressions produced were wrought in a legitimate sphere of action, and constituted a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest. They were relished by every man of genius: although there were found many men of genius who condemned them without just ground. The true critic will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, to the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable.[7]

The influence of the *Blackwood's* tales on Poe's development as critic and storywriter was crucial;[8] he arrived at his theory of the "single effect" through their study, and his very burlesques of the genre[9] show how he grasped that the secret lay partly in the accurate report of sensations.[10]

In Dickens' case, there is not such conclusive external evidence that Dickens studied *Blackwood's,* though he was recommending the journal to J. A. Overs as early as 1839.[11] We know, however, that George Hogarth, Dickens' father-in-law, had been a member of the famous literary circle in Edinburgh.[12] Mentioned by Christopher North (a leading contributor to *Blackwood's*), in *Noctes Ambrosian-*

6. *Blackwood's,* 13 (1823), 673; 17 (1825), 352; cf. 28 (1830), 322. Cited by Margaret Alterton, *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory* (Iowa City, 1929), pp. 14–16.
7. "Twice-Told Tales," quoted in *Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. M. Alterton and H. Craig (New York, 1935), pp. 360–61.
8. Alterton, pp. 7–45, 184–85.
9. See Poe, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," "A Predicament," and "Loss of Breath" in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1938), pp. 338–53, 395–404.
10. See Alterton, pp. 38–45; cf. p. 30.
11. Dickens to J. A. Overs, 27 Sept. 1839, *L,* 1:587.
12. Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph,* 2 vols. (New York, 1952), 1:101.

*ae,* Hogarth was also a friend of J. G. Lockhart, another important contributor, whom Dickens met in December 1837.[13] It seems likely that Hogarth took *Blackwood's* regularly or drew Dickens' attention to it. Dickens had been haunting the Hogarths' home from at least 1835, and he was being encouraged as a writer of promise by Hogarth, who persuaded him to contribute nineteen of the "Sketches by Boz," including "The Pawnbroker's Shop," to the *Evening Chronicle,* of which he had become editor.[14] The tales in *Blackwood's* were widely celebrated; Samuel Warren, for example, mentions the great stir one of the episodes in his "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician" was creating in the London clubs.[15] Although I have not been able to find any evidence that Dickens knew Henry Thompson, William Mudford, or Samuel Ferguson, of the other *Blackwood's* storywriters he met T. Colley Grattan during his first American tour[16] and he handled a good deal of William Maginn's work while editing *Bentley's.*[17] Furthermore, he was familiar with Samuel Warren's "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician," for in a letter of 1838 he writes to a would-be contributor: "I recollect very shortly after I received your two papers, writing you a note in which I ventured to say that I did not think the idea of a Surgeon's Diary at all a promising one after the Physician's; and that I did not consider your articles adapted to the Miscellany."[18]

There is also some internal evidence which suggests that *Blackwood's* influenced Dickens, whose career as a writer of fiction did not commence with *Pickwick* but with the tales he began contributing to the *Monthly Magazine* in 1833, later included in *Sketches by Boz.*[19] And it has been suggested that some of the tales included in

13. Dickens to John Forster, 12 Dec. 1837, *L,* 1:342.
14. Johnson, 1:101; cf. 1:122.
15. Quoted in Margaret Oliphant, *Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood and His Sons* (Edinburgh, 1897), 2:31. Samuel Warren's *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* was serialized in *Blackwood's* from August 1830 to August 1837, and the earlier chapters were published in book form in two volumes at Edinburgh in 1832; it ran through four very large impressions and the so-called fifth edition in three volumes, which also contained the later chapters, was published in 1837.
16. See Johnson, 1:365–66.
17. Dickens to Richard Bentley, 30 Nov. 1836, 28 Apr. 1837, ?15 Jan. 1838; and to W. Wilson, 30 Aug. 1837, *L,* 1:202, 253, 353, 300.
18. Dickens to Edward Oliver (June-July 1838), *L,* 1:410; Dickens could, however, be referring to the book version of *Passages,* which came out in 1832, enlarged by a further volume in 1837.
19. *SB,* pp. 275–494. No less than eight of the twelve tales were published between Dec. 1833 and Feb. 1835; see *L,* "Appendix F," 1:692–94.

*Pickwick* may also date from this period.[20] Critics and scholars have traditionally been surprised and even embarrassed by the interpolated stories in *Pickwick* and some have been driven to psychological explanations of their irrelevant intrusion.[21] These tales have usually been lumped together, though they differ very widely in quality and sometimes in nature.[22] Many of them, together with "The Black Veil," the trial scene from "Criminal Courts," and the closing episode of "A Visit to Newgate" in *Sketches by Boz,*[23] seem less surprising when we recognize their similarity to the *Blackwood's* tale and see in them Dickens' apprenticeship in an important literary technique. "The Stroller's Tale," "The Convict's Return," "A Madman's Manuscript," and "The Old Man's Tale about a Queer Client"[24] all attempt horror and terror in the realistic mode; even the whimsical "Bagman's Tale" and "Bagman's Uncle's Tale" mix realism with the grotesque and macabre. "A Madman's Manuscript" records the sensations and feelings of a paranoiac in accurate detail. Small wonder then that Poe was immediately attracted to Dickens' work.[25]

Internal evidence suggests that Dickens was especially familiar with "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician." The realistic picture of the physician's circumstances in "The Black Veil" recalls Warren's "Early Struggles," while Dickens' grisly but realistic pre-

20. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London, 1957), p. 73. Robert L. Patten ("The Interpolated Tales in *Pickwick Papers,*" Dickens Studies, 1 [1965], 86–89) argues convincingly, however, by reference to the relevant fragment of the original MS. of *PP,* which has survived, that the story of Prince Bladud, at least, was not written independently of the main narrative, and Steven Marcus (*Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* [London, 1965], pp. 41–43) puts forward the view that the tales are relevant to the novel's main theme.

21. See Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," in *The Wound and the Bow* (Boston, 1941), pp. 9–13; Johnson, 1:163–66; and Jack Lindsay, *Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York, 1950), pp. 142–45.

22. Apart from the four grimly realistic tales, which I discuss below, "The Bagman's Story" (*PP,* 14:178–91) is whimsically grotesque and contains an element of fantasy reminiscent of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *nouvelles*; "The Story of the Bagman's Uncle" (*PP,* 49:681–97) is a kind of humorous ghost story of a whimsical type; "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton" (*PP,* 29:396–405), the early sketch for *A Christmas Carol,* is a fairy story; "The True Legend of Prince Bladud" (PP, 36:507–11) is a rather wretched attempt at satirical parody of the folktale which explains a local phenomenon or custom; and "The Parish Clerk" (*PP,* 17:227–35) is a comic love tale.

23. *SB,* pp. 371–81, 198–99, 201–14.

24. *PP,* 3:35–40; 6:74–81; 11:139–47; 21:279–96.

25. See esp. Poe's earliest review of a work by Dickens, "Watkins Tottle and Other Sketches," *Southern Literary Messenger,* 2 (1836), 457–58.

occupation with the corpse of a hanged man and with the subject of "resurrection" is also found in Warren's "Grave Doings" and a note to "The Thunder-Struck.–The Boxer." Again, there are many accounts of madness and hallucination in Warren, including "Intriguing and Madness" and "The Spectral Dog"; in "The Spectre-Smitten," a record of the experience of madness from the viewpoint of the madman, together with quotations from a manuscript that he writes, there are notable resemblances to Dickens' "Manuscript of a Madman." Another parallel is so close that it can hardly be an accident. In both Warren's "The Forger" and the story of Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit,* a criminal requires medical attention for a complaint which is later discovered to be guilt for his crimes. In both cases the criminal is not at ease in circumstances of affluence and is something of a social misfit. In Warren the crime is forgery; in Dickens forgery is one of Merdle's crimes. In *Little Dorrit* Merdle commits suicide by cutting his throat; in "The Forger" the criminal says he feels as if he could cut his throat and later tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide.[26]

The episode which concludes "A Visit to Newgate" has been recognized as an obvious sketch for the later picture of Fagin's trial and last night alive. Some have suggested that the earlier version in *Sketches by Boz,* and thus by inference the penultimate chapter of *Oliver Twist,* recall Victor Hugo's *Dernier jour d'un condamné,*[27]

26. "Early Struggles," *Blackwood's,* 28 (1830), 322–38; "Grave Doings," 29 (1831), 960–67; "The Thunder-Struck.—The Boxer," 32 (1832), 279–84; "Intriguing and Madness," 28 (1830), 609–19; "The Spectral Dog," 28 (1830), 784–86; "The Spectre-Smitten," 29 (1831), 361–75; "The Forger," 28 (1830), 786–93. *Little Dorrit* was serialized from Dec. 1855 to June 1857. About three years before Dickens began *Little Dorrit,* his attention may very well have been drawn once again to the subject matter of "The Forger" when it was referred to in "Transported for Life," *Household Words,* 5, 31 July 1852, 460, as follows: "On the very night of his apprehension he had been reading aloud . . . 'The Diary of a late Physician,' and having finished one of the short stories he turned the page, and his eye caught the title of the next. It was the episode of the 'Forger.' He hesitated a moment; but, as he told me, he felt his wife's eye upon him, and a guilty fear of awakening her suspicions compelled him to read on. The details of the story sank deep into his heart, and he observed with a superstitious dread his wife's intense interest in the hero of the narrative. He had not laid down the book an hour, when the officers of justice arrived." (The author of "Transported for Life" is identified in the *Household Words* contributor's book as William Moy Thomas.)

27. George Hogarth, for example, in his review of *SB* in the London *Morning Chronicle,* 5 Feb. 1836, cited by Johnson (1:109). Professor Ada Nisbet draws my attention to another contemporary who noted a parallel between Dickens and Hugo. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, 27 Nov. 1842, Elizabeth Barrett Browning remarks:

but a much more likely influence is Henry Thomson's "Le Revenant" (1827), published in *Blackwood's* two years before Hugo's tale.

*Le dernier jour,* which was published in 1829 and not translated into English until 1840 (over a year after the appearance of the final pages of *Oliver Twist*), does contain some ideas similar, though in a very general sense, to certain ideas in the work of Thomson as well as that of Dickens. Such similarities are of the kind we might expect from gifted imaginations contemplating the same subject. Thus, all three authors record the passage of time so as to create suspense. Days of youth, love, and happiness are recalled and a dream of escape is rudely shattered in *Le dernier jour* and "A Visit to Newgate."[28] In *Le dernier jour* (13:223), as in "Le Revenant" and the penultimate chapter of *Oliver Twist*,[29] the prisoner at one point throws himself violently against the door of his cell. The previous occupants of the cell are evoked through the inscriptions they have made on the walls in "Le Revenant" (414) and *Le dernier jour* (11: 220; 12:221). However, when their phantoms are conjured up in the prisoner's delirium, his horror centers on decapitation in *Le dernier jour* (12:221) and on hanging in *Oliver Twist* (407). In *Le dernier jour* (39:235) and "Le Revenant" (414), the prisoner anxiously debates the question whether execution is as quick and painless as it is said to be. In Hugo, Thomson, and Dickens alike, the eye of the accused man in court seizes on vivid, specific details, but in *Le dernier jour* (2:217) alone these details are pleasant, providing an ironic contrast with the dreadful sentence with which the trial is to terminate. Finally, I can find only one close verbal parallel. Hugo, describing the crowd on the way to the scaffold, uses an image ("cette

"And have you observed what I have observed . . . that Charles Dickens has meditated deeply and not without advantage upon Victor Hugo,—and that some of his finest things (all for instance of the Jew's condemnation hours in Oliver Twist) are taken from Victor Hugo . . . 'Les derniers jours d'un condamné' and passim? I admire Boz very absolutely and gratefully . . . more than you do suspect,—but my sense of his power and genius grow grey and weak 'in a single night' with reading Hugo" (*Elizabeth Barrett to Miss Mitford,* ed. Betty Miller [New Haven, 1954], p. 147).

28. Victor Hugo, *Romans,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1963), vol. 1. Chs. 33, 17, pp. 233–34, 225–26; *SB,* pp. 213–14. Page references hereafter are given in text.

29. *Blackwood's,* 21 (1827), 413; *OT,* 52:407. Page references hereafter are given in text. *Oliver Twist* was serialized in *Bentley's Miscellany* from Feb. 1837 to Mar. 1839; the final chapters, however, were written during Oct. 1838, and the novel was published in book form in Nov. 1838.

route pavée et murée de visages humains," 48:239), which Dickens applies to the crowd at Fagin's trial: "The court was paved, from floor to roof, with human faces" (404).

Some of the similarities between Thomson and Dickens are also fairly general: the theme of escape from the gallows, for example, in "Le Revenant," "A Visit to Newgate," and chapter 52 of *Oliver Twist.* Other similarities no doubt seem closer than in the case of Hugo because the scene in Thomson and Dickens is laid in London; all three prison episodes in the two English authors take place in Newgate and use the chiming of clocks (they are identified in "Le Revenant" and "A Visit" as St. Sepulchre's and St. Paul's, respectively) as a device to create suspense. Much more impressive, however, is the similarity to Thomson's of Dickens' method of narration, particularly in chapter 52 of *Oliver Twist.* This method is neatly summed up by the narrator of "Le Revenant":

> My greatest pleasure, through life, has been the perusal of any extraordinary narratives of fact. . . . anecdotes and inquiries connected with the regulation of prisons, hospitals, or lunatic receptacles; nay, the very police reports of a common newspaper—as relative to matters of reality; have always excited a degree of interest in my mind which cannot be produced by the best invented tale of fiction. (409)

A reading of the court scenes of the two authors underscores the close parallel between them. This is how Thomson describes the scene:

> And I listened too—or tried to listen attentively—as hard as I could; and yet—with all I could do—I could not keep my thoughts from wandering! For the sight of the court—all so orderly, and regular, and composed, and formal, and well satisfied—spectators and all—while I was running on with the speed of wheels upon smooth soil downhill, to destruction—seemed as if the whole trial were a dream, and not a thing in earnest! The barristers sat round the table, silent, but utterly unconcerned, and two were looking over their briefs, and another was reading a newspaper; and the spectators in the galleries looked on and listened as pleasantly, as though it were a matter not of death going on: but of pastime or amusement; and one very fat man, who seemed to be the clerk of the Court, stopped his writing when the Judge began, but leaned back in his chair with his hands in his breeches' pockets, except once or twice that he took a snuff; and not one living soul seemed to take notice—they did not seem to know the fact—that there was a

poor, desperate, helpless, creature—whose days were fast running out—whose hours of life were even with the last grains in the bottom of the sand-glass—among them! I lost the whole of the Judge's charge—thinking of I know not what—in a sort of dream—unable to steady my mind to anything. (410–11)

Certain remarkable features of this description, the terrified mind of the accused, for example, alternating between close attention to the trial and an inability to concentrate, or dwelling upon the inessential in great detail, are repeated by Dickens in *Oliver Twist,* though with an added touch of genius. Dickens also stresses that the spectators, who regard the trial as a source of entertainment, are indifferent to the feelings of the prisoner; and, like Thomson, Dickens even has a fat man whom the prisoner singles out for special attention:

He [Fagin] stood there, in all this glare of living light, with one hand resting on the wooden slab before him, the other held to his ear, and his head thrust forward to enable him to catch with greater distinctness every word that fell from the presiding judge. . . . now that the judge ceased to speak, he still remained in the same strained attitude of close attention, with his gaze bent on him, as though he listened still.

A slight bustle in the court recalled him to himself. . . . The jailer touched him on the shoulder. He followed mechanically to the end of the dock, and sat down on a chair. The man pointed it out, or he would not have seen it.

He looked up into the gallery again. Some of the people were eating, and some fanning themselves with handkerchiefs; for the crowded place was very hot. There was one young man sketching his face in a little note-book. He wondered whether it was like, and looked on when the artist broke his pencil-point, and made another with his knife, as any idle spectator might have done.

In the same way, when he turned his eyes towards the judge, his mind began to busy itself with the fashion of his dress, and what it cost, and how he put it on. There was an old fat gentleman on the bench, too, who had gone out, some half an hour before, and now come back. He wondered within himself whether this man had been to get his dinner, what he had had, and where he had had it; and pursued this train of careless thought until some new object caught his eye and roused another. (404–5)

Dickens goes on to describe the wonderful heightening of sensations in Fagin, his acute awareness from time to time of minute and apparently irrelevant stimuli:

Not that, all this time, his mind was, for an instant, free from one oppressive overwhelming sense of the grave that opened at his feet; it was ever present to him, but in a vague and general way, and he could not fix his thoughts upon it. Thus, even while he trembled, and turned burning hot at the idea of speedy death, he fell to counting the iron spikes before him, and wondering how the head of one had been broken off, and whether they would mend it, or leave it as it was. Then, he thought of all the horrors of the gallows and the scaffold—and stopped to watch a man sprinkling the floor to cool it—and then went on to think again. (405)

This passage has an earlier parallel in the hypersensibility of the prisoner in "Le Revenant":

. . . and, strange as it was—with all that I could do, I could not keep myself from noticing these trifling things—though perdition was coming upon me the very next moment. I noticed the lamp which the turnkey had left on the floor, and which was burning dimly, with a long wick, being clogged with the chill and bad air, and I thought to myself—even at that moment—that it had not been trimmed since the night before. And I looked at the bare, naked, iron bed-frame that I sat on; and at the heavy studs on the door of the dungeon; and at the scrawls and writing upon the wall, that had been drawn by former prisoners, and I put my hand to try my own pulse, and it was so low that I could hardly count it:—I could not feel—though I tried to make myself feel it—that I was going to DIE. (414–15)

Similar also are the scenes in the condemned cell in which each prisoner gives way to a violent protest and his mind alternates between a dreamlike state and a morbid rehearsal of the sensations of being hanged. Thus, in "Le Revenant," we find:

I tried to say my prayers, but could only remember a word here and there; and then it seemed to me as if these were blasphemies that I was uttering;—I don't know what they were—I cannot tell what it was I said; and then, on a sudden, I felt as though all this terror was useless, and that I would not stay there to die; and I jumped up, and wrenched at the bars of my cell window with a force that bent them—for I felt as if I had the strength of a lion. And I felt all over the lock of my door; and tried the door itself with my shoulder—though I knew it was plated with iron, and heavier than that of a church. . . . Then I tried to recollect all the tales that I had ever heard about death by hanging—that it was said to be the sensation of a moment—to give no pain—to cause the extinction of life instantaneously—and so on, to twenty other strange ideas. By degrees my head began to wander and grow unmanageable again. I put

my hands tightly to my throat, as though to try the sensation of strangling. Then I felt my arms at the places where the cords would be tied. I went through the fastening of the rope—the tying of the hands together: the thing that I felt most averse to, was the having the white cap muffled over my eyes and face. If I could avoid that, the rest was not so very horrible! In the midst of these fancies, a numbness seemed to creep over my senses. The giddiness that I had felt, gave way to a dull stupor, which lessened the pain that my thoughts gave me. (413, 414)

This passage is a striking anticipation of Dickens' account:

He [Fagin] sat down on a stone bench opposite the door, which served for seat and bedstead; and casting his blood-shot eyes upon the ground, tried to collect his thoughts. After awhile, he began to remember a few disjointed fragments of what the judge had said: though it had seemed to him, at the time, that he could not hear a word. . . . As it came on very dark, he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold; some of them through his means. They rose up, in such quick succession, that he could hardly count them. He had seen some of them die,—and had joked too, because they died with prayers upon their lips. With what a rattling noise the drop went down; and how suddenly they changed, from strong and vigorous men to dangling heaps of clothes!

Some of them might have inhabited that very cell—sat upon that very spot. It was very dark; why didn't they bring a light? The cell had been built for many years. Scores of men must have passed their last hours there. It was like sitting in a vault strewn with dead bodies—the cap, the noose, the pinioned arms, the faces that he knew, even beneath that hideous veil.—Light, light!

At length, when his hands were raw with beating against the heavy door and walls, two men appeared. (406–7)

Finally, my argument that Dickens may have been indebted to "Le Revenant" is supported by a remarkable series of parallels between this tale and Dickens' "Criminal Courts" which immediately precedes "A Visit to Newgate" in *Sketches by Boz*. What makes these very close parallels even more remarkable is that in each case they occur in a passage of little more than a page:

| *"Le Revenant"* | *"Criminal Courts"* |
| --- | --- |
| I had never, though I lived in London, witnessed the proceedings of a Criminal Court before; and I could hardly believe the | Nothing is so likely to strike the person who enters them for the first time, as the calm indifference with which the proceedings |

| | |
|---|---|
| composure, and indifference. . . . | are conducted. . . . |
| The whole business of my trial and sentence, passed over as coolly and formally, as I would have calculated a question of interest, or summed up an underwriting account. | every trial seems a mere matter of business. |
| and yet civility—for there was no show of anger or ill temper. . . . the Judge asked, in a tone which had neither severity about it, nor compassion—nor carelessness, nor anxiety—nor any character or expression whatever that could be distinguished. . . . | There is a great deal of form, but no compassion; considerable interest, but no sympathy. |
| The barristers sat round the table, silent, but utterly unconcerned, and two were looking over their briefs, and another was reading a newspaper. . . . | Look upon the whole group in the body of the Court—some wholly engrossed in the morning papers, others carelessly conversing in low whispers. . . . |
| the spectators in the galleries looked on and listened as pleasantly, as though it were a matter not of death going on but of pastime or amusement. . . . | the spectators, who having paid for their admission, look upon the whole scene as if it were got up especially for their amusement. |
| and not one living soul seemed to take notice—they did not seem to know the fact—that there was a poor, desperate, helpless, creature—whose days were fast running out. . . . | and you can scarcely believe that the result of the trial is a matter of life or death to one wretched being present. |
| unable to steady my mind to anything, and only biting the stalk of a piece of rosemary that lay by me. (410–11) | you can almost hear the man's heart beat, as he bites the stalk of rosemary, with a desperate effort to appear composed. (*SB*, 198–99) |

Although "Criminal Courts" appeared in *Sketches by Boz,* Second Series (December 1836), it was one of the very earliest sketches Dickens wrote and was published in the London *Morning Chron-*

*icle,* 23 October 1834, under another title, "The Old Bailey." Dickens' debt to "Le Revenant," therefore, dates from the very beginning of his career. Since he published his first work of fiction, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk" (reprinted in *Sketches by Boz* as "Mr Minns and his Cousin"), in December 1833, we may conclude that the realistic *Blackwood's* tale of terror, which was making an impact on him just eleven months later (by which time he had published only the first ten of the fifty-six pieces that were to make up *Sketches by Boz*), was one of the earliest influences on his career and may well have been decisive in indicating an important direction his narrative art was to take.