Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin and Mr Bucket: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Intimations of the Thought-Police

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Abstract
The detective as a literary character was co-fathered within a brief interval from each other by Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens, but Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, who appears in three stories of the former - "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) - and low-born, illiterate Bucket, who wreaks havoc upon an ancient aristocratic family in Bleak House, were hatched within nests of widely different social and cultural provenance. The American boy treated to the long-established traditions of institutionalized education in the Old World, and the English child worker, whose father was imprisoned for debt, were a Victorian version of the Prince and Pauper plot. Our new-historicist approach to these early samples of detective fiction seeks to throw light on the discursive negotiations which may be invoked in an explanatory narrative of the polar representations of one and the same professional class shortly after the creation of the metropolitan police.

[Keywords: Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, detective fiction, New Historicism, social theory, biopolitics, interpellation, state and civil society]

Introduction
"Serre chaude", one feels inclined to remark, while gazing through the huge glass wall overlooking the Lawn out of the little room with scanty and outmoded furniture which Poe once enjoyed as a student at the University of Virginia. The landscape stretching beyond it displays the unfailing and severe geometry of an enclosed, rectangular yard, marked off by the columns of the neoclassic building and the smaller pillars distributed on top of the enclosing fence, giving it an aspect of medieval ramparts. A space charted by the theoretical habit of mind, aseptically secluded from the thoroughfare of the "men on business".

Poe's sense of the immateriality of life, which Angela Carter (“The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe”) is putting to the door of his mother being an actress, must have increased through years, with the illusory sights induced by drugs or by the two-dimensional scenes acted out by fatal and capricious cards. The main contributor,
though, were probably his absorbing reading and daring anticipations in the wake of sundry scientific theories imparting on him, not certainty, but a dizzying sense of things being permanently altered by their “peering eyes” (“Sonnet — To Science”). A knowledge of recondite German philosophy was the source, not only of the Kant-Laplace picture of the expanding/contracting universe in *Eureka*, but also of the pragmatic model of the operations of the mind, whose mechanics is analyzed with mathematical precision in his detective stories. Johann Friedrich Herbart’s notions of _Räsonnement_ and _Methode der Beziehungen_\(^1\) may have fed into the Poesque detective’s “ratiocination”, which turns reality inside out like a glove: “de nier ce qui est, et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas”\(^\text{ii}\).

“The fourth wall” is the consecrated metaphor for realist writing, which conveys in a more appropriate way Dickens’s processing of the body of experience than the symbolist “serre chaude” of analytical mental powers enabling Poe’s detective to retrieve missing information. Dickens opens his fictional universe to his real life experience, from the London low life he had known as a child to the Halls of Parliament, whose reporter he became in later years. “On Duty with Inspector Field” ushers the inmates of slums whom he used to visit in the company of a real police officer into a creditable “story”, whose protagonist seems to be twin-born with fictional detective Bucket of *Bleak House*.

In a century dominated by evolutionary theories, Dickens remained the unredeemed skeptic. The atrocities of the French Revolution which linger in the reader’s memory long after shutting *A Tale of Two Cities* had taught the far-seeing Victorian a bitter truth about humanity’s capacity for regression even after glorious periods of progress and spiritual enlightenment. The emergence of the rational and inquiring mind out of the mists of medieval dogmatism in the dawn of modernity and the first scientific revolution around 1700 had rendered highly improbable a reversion to fanaticism and fundamentalism, and yet it had happened again. The revenants of ideological totalitarianism had been grinning at his father’s generation out of the ruins of the collapsed Republic of Reason. It would happen again in the twentieth century, spawned with history’s horrors and art’s dystopic narratives.

**I. The Mechanics of the Mind**

The dissipation of mystery and logical deductions had been on the luminaries’ agenda. The explained supernatural and the solving of the puzzle were narrative devices which, even in the newly risen supernatural fiction, worked as “impurities” meant to cure medieval gothicism.

Johann Friedrich Herbart’s predictions of a person’s states of mind through the calculus of possible combinations of their sense impressions and memories had provided a method of reading minds which would lead to the emergence of a new
concept, that of “intersubjectivity”. The “robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber” in The Purloined Letter, used by Jacques Lacan to document his theory of this concept, may be traced back to the speculative field of the new physiological psychology, rooted in the associanistic psychology of Hartley and Hume, renamed “anthropology” by Kant, and formalized by Herbart, whose mathematical psychology spun off numerous research laboratories around mid-century. Poe’s access to Herbart was probably mediated by the Scottish luminaries, especially by J.S. Mill, who had found in the latter’s Wissenschaftliche Psychologie, published in 1825, support for his positivistic philosophy of social life constituted by history and local traditions. The argument is cast in intriguingly similar terms.

“He devolves upon his own world the responsibility of being in the right against the dissentient worlds of other people; and it never troubles him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous worlds is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin”. iv

According to Herbart, the psychological law which controls the clustering of representations in the mind, the vacillation and flow of psychological facts can be retraced or retrieved (Ergänzung) through speculation over the associations which are most likely to come to the fore through exposure to stimuli from the environment, while driving the weaker ones into the unconscious or making them sink into memory. There are no such things as transcendental subject or freedom of will; the living conditions will bear upon the I, falsifying it, rendering it impure (86). They are like the x and y axes in a coordinate system (20); one can deduce someone else’s thought process from the stimuli in the world (der sinnliche Raum).

Mill wonders that people should be troubled by the opinions of others when they themselves, if they had been born in some other place on earth, would have been completely distinct persons: an Anglo-Catholic or a Buddhist ...

Some three decades in advance, Herbart had put the question in the same terms: by being born under different conditions, he could have become someone else: “Ein ganz Anderer hätte werden können.”. He sets out to discover “on what basis is built the consciousness of those who live in Peking or Orinooko, as well as of those who live next to us”. And yet, he goes on, in self-mockery, although the I is merely an aggregate of related representations, permanently altered by the changing conditions of experience, never complete, he has the impression of being known to himself, substantial and consistent” (89).

Herbart dismisses thus the classical definition of identity as unity of subject and object (the I being its own object), but he makes up for this loss by pointing to the
reliability of the I-Thou relationship. The ‘I’ may find confirmation in the progress of thought in someone else's mind, especially of one affined. The empirical I is permanently becoming, but its negation, or “non-Ich”, realised as progress of thought (Gang des Denkens - 131) or cluster of representations associated with a priori necessity, is constituted as an absolute I, in which the principle of Being and Thinking are fused (111). It is objects given in common that give rise to the same thought in different subjects.

The detective solves the enigma in The Purloined Letter, because he taps the robber’s Räsonnement. By predicting someone else’s train of thoughts, the subject allows himself to be modified by another. M is not N, yet M=N (130). The represented (the robber’s thoughts) becomes the representing (representing the Minister in the detective’s mind). In the process of Räsonnement, the Object is Another as Subject: the Object of the Detective’s puzzling is not what he thinks of the robber, but what he thinks.

Poe engaged twice in the experimental test of Herbart’s theory of the way the mind works: when he tried to predict reader response (“Poetic Principle”), and when he created the detective as literary character.

In the image-maker, says Herbart, there are no things but only representations (149). The way things are combined in a representation (Zusammenfassung in ein Vorstellen) is only known to those who possess the code which charters physical space as a shared world.

In Murders in Rue Morgue, the narrator and detective Dupin withdraw from the busy day life, going out for a walk at night, or reading and commenting their favourite book. They are kindred spirits, whose affinities reach the point where they can read each other’s minds. Chevalier Dupin explains to the narrator how he had managed to track the chain of his thoughts, whose outlets were apparently disconnected: Chantily – Orion – Dr. Nicol – Epicurus – stereotomy - the street stones - the fruiterer. Each signified becomes a signifier of some other meaning. Which are, then, the signifieds which keep sliding under signifiers, the key-words in the story, based, apparently, on a political murder?

The women’s name is only slightly modified: L'Espanaye, instead of Lespanan. They live in an imaginary street, whose name, however, could be used in its literal sense in the Paris of 1789-94, which had itself become a “morgue”. This is a street branching off from a real one, Richelieu, in the St. Roch (Roch-elle?) Faubourg. The two protagonists are taking a stroll in the neighbourhood of Palais Royal, built for Richelieu, but serving as the residence of the princes d’Orleans. One of them, Louis Philip, was a member of the Jacobin Club. This palace is associated with Theatre de Varieté, his red eminence having indeed become a figure of grotesque masquerade in the days of the
Revolution, when his mummified head was severed and exposed by a duke of Bretagne, whose deputation to the National Convention founded the first Jacobin Club. The Huguenot sailor may be carrying with him the wrath of his ancestors besieged by Richelieu at La Rochelle. The two women are surprised while arranging some letters in an iron chest by an ourang-outang brought over from Indonesia by the sailor, which had got out of his control. Close by is found a great amount of Napoleons recently drawn from the bank, the two elements being easy to combine in the Saint-Domingue-slaves-support plot. The cast of witnesses includes name-sakes of some famous figures of the Revolution, such as Pierre Moreau, the man who got the keys of the Bastille from the people, and Vidocq, the chief of the secret police under Napoleon. Andrea Goulet makes a list of the names the same papers called Napoleon on hearing the news of his escape from his Elbe prison: monster, tiger, tyrant ...

Poe will have been familiar with the representation of Napoleon’s soldiers who invaded Germany as a sort of “cannibals’ progress” in a book republished by William Cobbett in Philadelphia. The man from Corsica supported by the Jacobins to take over the power is compared to an inarticulate beast. As well as Frankenstein’s creature, the agent of a senseless act of insane cruelty cannot be assimilated by the empire of mankind. The sailor had brought it from Asia, and the speakers of seven European nations, called upon to decode its “speech”, react to it as to an absolute enigma, excluded from the world’s rational and linguistic order.

II. “Power of Mind over Mind”

What to Herbart appeared as loss of one’s own sense of identity through participation in the order of intersubjectivity, Jeremy Bentham had taken years speculating upon as his proleptic version of the “will to power”. The object of his strenuous meditation was launched in 1798 as Proposal for a New and Less Expensive
mode of Employing and Reforming Convicts, advertised as the universal solution to all social ills: “Morals reformed - health preserved - industry invigorated, instruction diffused - public burthens lightened - Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock - the gordian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut, but untied - all by a simple idea in Architecture!” vii.

The architecture of his prison honoured its name, that of “Panopticon”, but, unlike Herbart’s mutual knowledge of interacting subjects, Bentham entrusted the power of the gaze solely to the social category charged with the “surveying and punishment”viii of social transgressors: The prisoners in their cells, occupying the circumference—The officers in the centre.

Passported for literary history as the acclaimer of Bentham, J. S. Mill was actually very far from backing up an agenda of the individual’s annihilation at the hands of society’s policing system. In Chapter II of his essay “On Liberty”, he drastically limits the encroachment of social control on individual liberties to forms of persuasion:

“...The maxims are, first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people if thought necessary by them for their own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct” (86).

Mill was arguing along lines previously drawn by William Cobbett, editor of Political Register, which had helped turn the political philosophy of the luminaries into English practice.

As well as Cobbett, Charles Dickens was involved in the press release of parliamentary debates. His image of the mind, as it was theorised by the new psychology, was the yield of observation and experience, as we may conclude from the perfect analogy one can establish, for instance, between the real detective Field, whom he accompanied on his night rounds, and subsequently reported on (“On Duty with Inspector Field”), and fictional detective, Bucket.

According to Paul Begg and Keith Skinner, who searched the Scotland Yard files, Dickens also referred to Field as "Inspector Wield".ix The inspector was not just Fate incarnated, who delighted in administering punishments and rewards, but a wielder, an engineer of the soul, whose word was a command that brought a new man into existence with the force of a pointed finger. Inspector Field had “a habit of emphasising
his conversation by the air of a corpulent fore-finger", similar to Mr Gradgrind’s in the almost contemporary *Hard Times*, whose “square forefingers emphasized his observations”. Such a fundamentalist habit of mind, whose discourse is reduced to “nothing but” and “the one thing needful”, could not, however, in the backdrop of the Enlightenment, assume other forms than those selected by Mill out of the semantic area of persuasion.

II.1. From War of Manoeuvre to War of Position.

It seems odd that, writing from prison, Antonio Gramsci is still speaking in terms of the East-West polarity in reference to the coercive character of the State, but such is the power of cultural stereotypes. The eastern society is a political one, he thinks, in which power belongs to a restricted oligarchy, while the mass of citizens are subject to the repressive actions of the state apparatus. By contrast, in the West, the State has evolved towards a civil society in which institutions have taken over the initiative of channelling individual energies in the wake of the public good. The state’s frontal attack on the citizen, the war of manoeuvre, has yielded to the “educative and formative role of the State”.

"In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying—but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country" (494).

Cultural hegemony is passing from the aristocracy to the middle class in the novels of Thackeray, Dickens or The Brontës, but with little improvement in the way of a more civilized “civil society”. The crisis of the family goes hand in hand with an intellectual and
moral one. Orphaned at an early age, the majority protagonists are exposed, in school or at work, to repressive methods of their socialization as “collective man”. Sir Leicester, the degenerate descendant of an aristocratic family, whose decay started significantly at the time of the Civil War, is going down in the world, while the pulley of changing hegemony is bringing up the “iron man”, a cog in the machinery of highly organized and standardised industrial production. A change for a more democratic arrangement? No; the Rouncewell party of skilled workers impose conditions on pretenders to their families as strict, although of a different sort, as the aristocratic cast of old. Sir Leicester’s complaints about the collapse of “the whole framework of society”, with “wat-tylerish” subverters obliterating the landmarks, and opening the floodgates” are symptoms of his realisation that a whole way of life was vanishing. Tulkinghorn, the family lawyer, has become too passive and inefficient to cater for his master’s personal needs, while Bucket, from the Detective Department, will not allow anybody to escape what Gramsci calls “the standardisation of thought and action” and the “tendency to conformism in the contemporary world”. He expects Sir Leicester to behave properly in no less degree than a commoner like Snagsby. Commoners are everywhere now - in Parliament, in the administration, in the powerful industrial mechanism - and they either have no idea of Chesny Wo[r]ld, or have left it behind and stepped over to the other side of the barricade.

Bucket is not dealing with individual human beings but with stereotypes. He is straightjacketing people into a cast of social types whose common feature is compliance with the LAW, in whose name he comes to them. He is not serving Leicester but telling him what to do, and even what he is capable of, and what he should remember. He is trying to impose on him states or acts which lie outside the Baronet’s control:

"Now, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet," Mr. Bucket begins, standing over him with one hand spread out on the library-table and the forefinger of the other in impressive use, "it’s my duty to prepare you for a train of circumstances that may, and I go so far as to say that will, give you a shock. But Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, you are a gentleman, and I know what a gentleman is and what a gentleman is capable of. A gentleman can bear a shock when it must come, boldly and steadily. A gentleman can make up his mind to stand up against almost any blow. Why, take yourself, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. If there’s a blow to be inflicted on you, you naturally think of your family. You ask yourself, how would all the ancestors of yours, away to Julius Caesar - not to go beyond him at present - have borne that blow; you remember scores of them that would have borne it well; and you bear it well on their accounts, and to maintain the family credit. That’s the way you argue, and that’s the way you act, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet".
In counterdistinction to Gramsci’s unjustified optimism about the capacity of the law and of the new forces of production to heal contradictions, Dickens saw in the Law which Bucket was defending “with his forefinger” the headquarters of the modern bureaucratic society, an anticipation of Kafka’s Castle. The various solutions tried on by citizens, from Gridley’s articulated protest to Jarndyce’s secret “Growlery” and Skimpole’s “Can’t”, are as many pathetic failures of the individual in their unequal confrontations with the System.

II.2. Interpellation

Not more than Dickens did Louis Althusser trust in the possibility envisaged by Gramsci for the individual to act “in and against the State”. i.e. to try and reform it from within. In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1972), Althusser defines ideology, not as the space of free confrontation of ideas, but as a system of relationships which ensure the assimilation of the individual into the power structure.

The impersonal-rhetorical questions in the opening of “On Duty with Inspector Field” suggest that the destitute of London whom Field is policing at night time are as indifferent and alien to him as the samples displayed at the British Museum.

“How goes the night? [...] Anything doing here to-night? [...]”

Inspector Field is, to-night, the guardian genius of the British Museum. He is bringing his shrewd eye to bear on every corner of its solitary galleries, before he reports ‘all right.’ Suspicious of the Elgin marbles, and not to be done by cat-faced Egyptian giants with their hands upon their knees, Inspector Field, sagacious, vigilant, lamp in hand, throwing monstrous shadows on the walls and ceilings, passes through the spacious rooms. If a mummy trembled in an atom of its dusty covering, Inspector Field would say, ‘Come out of that, Tom Green. I know you!’”

All he will know or care about is what the citizen should think and do. Whereas the object of his investigation is to him like a lump of clay to be shaped according to his desire, his body is surrounded in the public eye by an aura of anxiety. What the citizen experiences in the detective officer’s presence is an unaccountable mix of fear and confusion.

In like manner, Bucket intimidates civilians with his “ghostly manner of appearing”; on being told his profession, Snagsby feels “a strong tendency in his clump of hair to stand on end”.
Bucket uses all possible means of persuasion in order to get Snagsby’s assistance as informer: flattery, intimidation, appeal to values supposed to be universally accepted, suppression of his scruples of conscience. He presumes to be the one to know better than Snagsby who that man is and what he believes in. The commandments of his deontic code are passed off for Snagby’s own. With an unfailing instinct of the operations of the mind, Bucket deploys a master crescendo of persuasive strategy to the point where he makes things look as if he were serving Snagsby’s interests, not the other way round:

"Don't you be afraid of hurting the boy," he says. "You won't do that. It's all right as far as the boy’s concerned. We shall only bring him here to ask him a question or so I want to put to him, and he'll be paid for his trouble and sent away again. It'll be a good job for him. I promise you, as a man, that you shall see the boy sent away all right. Don't you be afraid of hurting him; you an't going to do that."

"Very well, Mr. Tulkinghorn!" cries Mr. Snagsby cheerfully. And reassured, "Since that's the case--"

"Yes! And lookee here, Mr. Snagsby," resumes Bucket, taking him aside by the arm, tapping him familiarly on the breast, and speaking in a confidential tone. "You're a man of the world, you know, and a man of business, and a man of sense. That's what YOU are."

"I am sure I am much obliged to you for your good opinion," returns the stationer with his cough of modesty, "but--"

"That's what YOU are, you know," says Bucket. "Now, it an't necessary to say to a man like you, engaged in your business, which is a business of trust and requires a person to be wide awake and have his senses about him and his head screwed on tight (I had an uncle in your business once)--it an't necessary to say to a man like you that it's the best and wisest way to keep little matters like this quiet. Don't you see? Quiet!"

"Certainly, certainly," returns the other.

"I don't mind telling YOU," says Bucket with an engaging appearance of frankness, "that as far as I can understand it, there seems to be a doubt whether this dead person wasn't entitled to a little property, and whether this female hasn't been up to some games respecting that property, don't you see?"

"Oh!" says Mr. Snagsby, but not appearing to see quite distinctly.

"Now, what YOU want," pursues Bucket, again tapping Mr. Snagsby on the breast in a comfortable and soothing manner, "is that every person should have their rights according to justice. That's what YOU want."
"To be sure," returns Mr. Snagsby with a nod.

"On account of which, and at the same time to oblige a--do you call it, in your business, customer or client? I forget how my uncle used to call it."

"Why, I generally say customer myself," replies Mr. Snagsby.

"You're right!" returns Mr. Bucket, shaking hands with him quite affectionately.

"---On account of which, and at the same time to oblige a real good customer, you mean to go down with me, in confidence, to Tom-all-Alone's and to keep the whole thing quiet ever afterwards and never mention it to any one. That's about your intentions, if I understand you?"

"You are right, sir. You are right," says Mr. Snagsby.

"Then here's your hat," returns his new friend, quite as intimate with it as if he had made it; "and if you're ready, I am" (Ch. XXII).

II.3. Collective Man

The incident which brings Mr. Bucket onto the stage of Bleak House is the death of Lady Leicester’s former lover, whose life among the social dregs of Tom-all-Alone deserves no other name than Nemo - Nobody. Neither Captain Howdon nor anybody falling under the power of a Law which "makes business with itself" remains pilot of his life’s ship. In “On Duty with Inspector Field”, the officers’ “harrowing” of the underworld of filth, disease and crime has the eerie effect of animating the dust to which human beings have been reduced:

Wheresoever Mr. Rogers turns the flaming eye, there is a spectral figure rising, unshrouded, from a grave of rags. Who is the landlord here? - I am, Mr. Field! says a bundle of ribs and parchment against the wall, scratching itself. - Will you spend this money fairly, in the morning, to buy coffee for ’em all? - Yes, sir, I will! - O he'll do it, sir, he'll do it fair. He's honest! cry the spectres. And with thanks and Good Night sink into their graves again.

The distressing show of the complete demise of the individual will is conveyed through the use of an emphatic, incremental “all”: “All watch him, all answer when addressed, all laugh at his jokes, all seek to propitiate him”

Out of the nothingness predicted by the dead sun in Bleak House, or by its total absence in Inspector Field’s nightly spree, the way out is only open to converts and instruments in the enforcement of the Law:
“A sharp, smiling youth, the wit of the kitchen, interposes. He an’t musical to-night, sir. I’ve been giving him a moral lecture; I’ve been a talking to him about his latter end, you see. A good many of these are my pupils, sir. This here young man (smoothing down the hair of one near him, reading a Sunday paper) is a pupil of mine. I’m a teaching of him to read, sir. He’s a promising cove, sir. He’s a smith, he is, and gets his living by the sweat of the brow, sir. So do I, myself, sir.”

This “wit of the kitchen”, cowering before Inspector Field “like a schoolboy before his schoolmaster”, as well as plebeian Bucket, born of Dickens’s recollections of early childhood in a London not much different from the fictional slums of Tom-all-Alone, were casting on the walls of a Benthamite prison-world the menacing shadow of the future Inquisitor O’Brien in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Chevalier Dupin, hatched by a mind schooled in Jefferson’s establishment of Johnsonian refinement and mixed scientific-philological concerns, was sending a message of mental and social distinction to a young state founded on political philosophy rather than the hypothetical social contract of primitive necessity. By contrast, Dickens seems to have been shown the future by some Sybil prophesying the totalitarian empires which policed the mind and engineered the soul in the twentieth century.

**Notes**


vi *The Cannibals’ progress; or The dreadful horrors of French invasion: as displayed by the Republican officers and soldiers, in their perfidy, rapacity, ferociousness, and brutality, exercised towards the innocent inhabitants of Germany*. Translated from the German. By Anthony Aufrer, Esq. (London: Wright, Cadel and others. Republished at Northampton, by William Butler, 1798, and at Philadelphia, by William Cobbett in 1819)


xii Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ch LIV. http://www.dickens-literature.com/Bleak_House/54.html


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