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Chapter 2. Present Tense

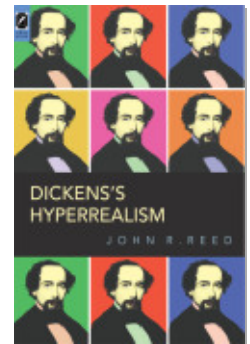
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CHAPTER 2

Present Tense¹

Present-tense narration is not very compatible with the general aims of realism. It shares some traits with first-person narration that make it undesirable. To begin with, it is more likely to introduce an unreliable narrator. A first-person narrator, even if recording past events, nonetheless introduces the subjectivity of an individual character. A powerful nineteenth-century example is Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*. Thackeray signals Lyndon's unreliability by revealing that he is writing from prison, a hint at Lyndon's morally objectionable character. Present-tense narration could have the same "flaw" unless it is the historical present not identified with a specific narrator, but, in fiction, that is not usually the case. Realism generally aims at the provability of the chronicle, and therefore past-tense and third-person narration serve it best. First-person narration serves certain formulaic genres well, as in the traditional model of the adventure story such as Scott's *Rob Roy* or Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. Modern detective fiction, from Conan Doyle to Raymond Chandler, gravitates toward first-person narration and sometimes present-tense narration. But present-tense narration has an added quality that sets it aside from most other forms of narration—its radical uncertainty. If one is actually writing/nar-

rating at the moment that events are taking place, no outcome can be predicted safely. It is largely this quality that makes present-tense narration unattractive to realist fiction, which often seeks to establish predictable lines of development, whether through social situations, heredity, character formation, or any other broad influence. Some modern novelists have been able to combine first-person narration with a deep concern about the human condition. I think first of Albert Camus. But then, because of their philosophical content and fabular construction, I would definitely not put Camus' fiction in the genre of realism. Collins and Dickens experimented with present-tense narration while trying to preserve authorial control and while adhering to a providential view of human existence. This was not an easy purpose to achieve, but I believe both succeeded in their different ways.

The present tense in fiction was not new when Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins came to make use of it. *Clarissa* and other diary and epistolary novels had exploited the mode long before. Such novels gained the advantage, through present tense, of making the events of their narratives appear immediate.² Moreover, by restricting the narrative voice or voices to the present, there could be little chance for a premature revelation of what was to occur in the future of the narrative. Aside from these modes of present tense, the traditional novel did make use of present tense in third-person narratives. As Christine Brooke-Rose points out, however, "in nineteenth-century fiction, brief passages in the historic present are used for vivid scenes before safe returns to the past, and the present tense is favoured for universalizing moral or social comments from the author" (12).³ Dickens and Collins in their use of the present tense anticipate experiments with tense in the twentieth century, including Modernist and *nouveau roman* fiction. But whereas twentieth-century narratives exploiting present tense are chiefly concerned to liberate the narrative from the tyranny of the narrator, as in the fiction of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Dickens and Collins used the device to strengthen the narrative voice's power by taking command of the future and withholding its secrets from the reader.

In what follows, I shall examine how Collins and especially Dickens use present-tense narration in a way that violates recent thinking about "historical" narration and how, in doing so, they increase authorial control. Collins employs the traditional device of a present-tense text embedded in an otherwise past-tense narrative, but Dickens is more innovative. In fact, Christian Paul Casparis, one of a few critics to deal extensively with present-tense narration, credits Dickens with being the first novelist "to use the Present tense in a structured manner on a large scale" (62). My discussion of Collins's and Dickens's use of present tense will require brief preliminary discussions of

the role of tense in narration and of the providential esthetic of nineteenth-century literature.

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In *Problems in General Linguistics*, Emile Benveniste drew a helpful distinction between two planes of utterance, that of history and that of discourse. *History* is delimited, in terms of tense, to three possibilities—the aorist (simple past), the imperfect, and the pluperfect. It excludes everything “autobiographical,” especially the present tense (206–7). By contrast, *discourse* is free to use all tenses except the aorist (209). Benveniste defines present tense as “the time at which one is speaking.’ This is the eternally ‘present’ moment, although it never relates to the same events of an ‘objective’ chronology because it is determined for each speaker by each of the instances of discourse related to it. Linguistic time is *self-referential*. Ultimately, human temporality with all its linguistic apparatus reveals the subjectivity inherent in the very using of language” (227). In associating discourse with subjectivity and language with the possibility of subjectivity, Benveniste seems to reinforce the separation of history, the narration of past events, and discourse, the more broadly conceived plane of language use. I shall argue, however, that it is precisely across the boundaries of history and discourse that Collins and Dickens achieve some remarkable effects, effects that, in our own day might be most closely identified with cinema.

Aside from writers like Christian Paul Casparis, few narratologists have paid much attention to present-tense narration. Seymour Chatman remarks that “verbal narratives in English are occasionally written in the present tense. But story-time is still usually the past” (83). He also observes that cinema is the medium most clearly associated with real-time narration (84). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan cites one type of narration that “is simultaneous with the action, e.g. reporting or diary entries,” and gives Butor’s *La Modification* as an example. Rimmon-Kenan does not pursue this narrative possibility. Most narratologists seem to take for granted the position that Philip J. M. Sturgess, following Gerald Prince’s treatment of the subject in *Narratology*, summarizes thus:

To narrate is also to commit oneself to a tense of narration, with that of the past tense being overwhelmingly the elected mode. Unlike the present tense which has, so to speak, contingency and even the possibility of sudden closure or cancellation built into it, the past tense seems to offer a guarantee of narrativity since it denotes a certainty of temporal duration, extending to whatever (present) temporal vantage point the narrator may be understood

to be narrating from. Within such duration, obviously enough, events and situations can be understood to have occurred, people to have lived and perhaps died. In other words the past tense is narrativizable in a way that the present tense does not suggest itself to be. (23)

But it is precisely the possibility of “sudden closure or cancellation,” among other uncertainties, that makes present tense an attractive method for creating anxieties and exploiting uncertainty. Dorrit Cohn, picking up Gérard Genette’s expression “simultaneous narrating,” goes on to demonstrate how present-tense narration can avoid two prominent conventions of fictional realism, first-person fictional narration and the interior monologue, by “dissolving the semantic specificity that attends the historical present,” thus encouraging the reader “to understand the present as a temporally indeterminate or ‘absolute’ narrative tense, for which the most appropriate term—highlighting its fiction-specificity—would seem to be ‘fictional present’” (106). She explains that whereas the fictional diary or letter may shrink the temporal hiatus to hours or even minutes, simultaneous narration reduces it to zero, “the moment of narration is the moment of experience, the narrating self is the experiencing self” (107). As we shall see, this is the distinction between Collins’s and Dickens’s use of present-tense narration, the full impact of which does not seem to have registered with their critics.⁴ Part of their narrative strategy was determined by what has been called the providential esthetic, which establishes a difference between their use of present-tense narration and its use by such modern authors as John Fowles, J. M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, and others.

There now exists a tradition of critical writing that accepts the significance of providence as a narrative ally in literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in England.⁵ Generally this critical view admits that an assumption of providential design lies behind many of the ultimately positive narrative schemes produced by British novelists. Often the providential design was openly acknowledged. But developments during the nineteenth century, including the theory of evolution propounded by Charles Darwin and others, problematized the notion of providential control and introduced an anxiety about the future that was new in kind. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle remembered the mood of that midcentury time:

[F]rom my reading and from my studies, I found that the foundations not only of Roman Catholicism but of the whole Christian faith, as presented to me in nineteenth century theology, were so weak that my mind could not build upon them. It is to be remembered that these were the years when Huxley, Tyndall, Darwin, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill were our

chief philosophers, and that even the man in the street felt the strong sweeping current of their thought, while to the young student, eager and impressionable, it was overwhelming. (26)

In general, both Dickens and Collins employed the providential pattern to one degree or another in their novels, but the openness of the future also became for them an intriguing counterpoint to the directedness of providential designs. Because present tense is blind to the future, it was an excellent tool for exploiting anxiety about the outcomes of narratives.

. . .

Wilkie Collins's utilization of present-tense narration to manipulate his audience is relatively conventional. It is his insertion of Marian Halcombe's narrative in *The Woman in White* (1860) that is most relevant to my exploration of the inventive ways in which Victorian writers play with narrative structure in order to exploit their readers' fears about the future. Marian's voice is remarkably strong; the reader can hardly help but like her, and, in fact, some have even fallen in love with her.⁶ However, rather than listening for *what* we hear in her voice, it will be more profitable for us to look at *how* we hear Marian's story. It is in this facet of the narration that we see both Collins's achievement with regard to narrative form and his genius for generating suspense. Peter Thoms points out that early detective fiction "not only reflects authorial exuberance in intricate plotting but also reveals an extensive critique of narrative patterns and the compulsions that generate them" (3). Collins's manipulation of the narrative was quite purposeful, and it can be no accident that the revelation of Marian's story takes place under the very controlled circumstances that I shall now detail.

Before dealing specifically with Marian's testimony, it is worthwhile to provide a brief review of the structure of Collins's novel as a whole. *The Woman in White*, like *The Moonstone* (1868), consists of a series of first-person narratives compiled by one character in order to guide the reader through the unraveling of a mystery. It is constructed as if we are reading individual testimony, and much has been written on the ways in which Collins's experimentation with this form resulted in a greater sense of mystery. Each eyewitness is allowed to reveal only his or her own firsthand experiences, thus effectively eliminating any problems Collins might have had with a third-person narrator who, if omniscient, would have had sometimes to withhold information in order to maintain suspense and mystery. But the analysis we are working toward has to move beyond discussing simply that brilliant aspect of Collins's novels. It is important to note that while we hear

the voices of individual characters, they do not truly speak for themselves; they are, in effect, edited.⁷ Individual testimonial texts, such as transcribed accounts, series of letters, diaries, and so forth, reach the reader only after they have passed under the pen of the editing character. In *The Woman in White*, this character is Walter Hartright, and it is only through him that we hear the voices of the other characters. Sometimes their stories, as in the case of Mrs. Catherick, are culled from letters that are addressed to Hartright himself. Most of the time the accounts are written as documents, as in the cases of Vincent Gilmore and Eliza Michelson. But these are still directed to Hartright, as is demonstrated by Gilmore who begins, “I write these lines at the request of my friend, Mr. Walter Hartright” (127). These submitted testimonies offer us interesting venues for investigating various aspects of narration, but here we are concerned with one specific aspect best explored in the portion of the text described as “The Story continued by MARIAN HALCOMBE, in Extracts from her Diary” (163).

Diary writing enters into a mixed temporality: it is neither fully present, nor fully past. The diary entry generally records the immediate past, oftentimes what has transpired over the course of that same day.⁸ As it describes an incident, the tense tends toward the past—*we breakfasted*.⁹ But diaries are also immersed in their own present: the author *is* writing. As entries depict the setting in which they are being created, they may allude to that very instantaneous temporality—I *am sitting in the window seat in the parlor as I write this down*—and then return to reflections upon the past, which are easier to sustain. The diarist may also venture into the time of the future, but it is generally only possible for the writer to do so in the most uncertain of terms—*tomorrow we depart: will I ever look upon these walks and gardens again?* In her work on both the diary (nonfictive) and the diary novel, Lorna Martens determines that the diarist “cannot foresee what will happen or what he will think on any future date, and if he keeps his diary as a general record, he cannot predict what he will write about in the future. The diary is thus a form that eludes the author’s full control” (33). Therefore, as the diarist records his or her present, there can be no true foreshadowing of what is to come: the writer has absolutely no idea of the way in which things will work themselves out or even which incidents are important. The same is not true for the novelist who employs a diarist in her fiction. She may still fit the diary into the overall narrative design.

Herein lies the brilliance of Collins allowing Marian to speak only in this medium. In a diary, all kernels of information are equal in that they have yet to be judged with an eye to the end. Even though a reader of the novel might be fully aware of the author’s (Collins’s) control of the diarist’s entries, he/she cannot know what the author intends to reveal any-

more than he/she can surmise what is unknown as yet to the diarist. The diarist might place greater emphasis on some happenings or observations than on others, but then readers must determine whether or not they trust the character's intuitiveness (a term which I am here differentiating from reliability) before they can decide if the diary's hierarchy of information is accurate. So, as the Victorian reader entered into the narrative of the diary, he or she would have been, as we still are, forced to question Marian's ability to record clues to the future. Marian herself questions this ability. In her self-examination of advice she has given to Hartright, she writes, "Except Laura, I never was more anxious about anyone than I am now about Walter. All that has happened since he left us has only increased my strong regard for him. I hope I am doing right in trying to help him to employment abroad—I hope, most earnestly and anxiously that it will end well" (177).¹⁰ Here, independent of an editorial time, Marian has access only to the near past and her immediate present as she attempts to analyze her situation and predict the outcome of her actions. Her diary provides a perfect medium through which the Victorian reader can be confronted with questions of knowledge and destiny. By examining what is important today, is it possible to find traces of what will be imperative in the future? Does Fate foreshadow? Does Providence guide?

Of course, Collins complicates this inquiry into the future by sometimes suggesting that this particular Victorian quest is an anxious occupation in its own right. Anticipating the marriage of Laura to Sir Glyde, Marian herself is conflicted by her construction of the tomorrows that stretch endlessly before her. "I am writing of the marriage and the parting with Laura, as people write of a settled thing. It seems so old and so unfeeling to be looking at the future already in this cruelly composed way" (187). The pursuit of knowledge will continue as the marriage preparations unfold; and, again, the reader is put in a position parallel to that of the character speaking. Because Marian is recording her impressions as they occur to her, we are given mistaken and contradicting accounts of Glyde. "19th.—More discoveries in the inexhaustible mine of Sir Percival's virtues" (192); "20th.—I hate Sir Percival!" (194). However, this ambivalence does not erode Marian's credibility; it simply intensifies the reader's sense of sharing the present-tense temporality of the speaker. After Sir and Lady Glyde return to England and establish themselves and their guests at Blackwater Park, Laura confides her anxieties to Marian: "Every fresh thing he does, seems to terrify me about the future" (253). If central characters fear the future, what must the reader feel? Through the temporal form of the diary, one lacking the consistency and confidence of hindsight, readers are able to experience the same apprehensions and uncertainties as Marian and Laura. There is no frame that can

establish a retrospective analysis of events, so when Marian writes, “I almost dread tomorrow,” so too can the reader! (259).

Martens tells us that “the diary novel . . . emphasizes the time of writing rather than the time that is written about” (4). Thus, while Marian’s diary provides us with clues to what deviousness Fosco and Glyde are concocting, the emphasis is on Marian’s vulnerability. The very introduction of her diary into the narrative heightens its suspense since the reader cannot be sure that Marian herself has survived from the time of her documenting into the time of the compiling. Todorov tells us that “the movement [in suspense] is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes . . . and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen” (47). Collins’s suspense is not that of gangsters (cause) and corpses (effect), but of diary (the medium through which Marian speaks) and absent writer (why else would a woman hand over the record of her most private thoughts?). It is this twist that demonstrates Collins’s ingenious understanding of what might frighten his audience—he played on their fears of not having the means to know the end. Marian’s section of the narrative ends with the same insinuation of absence—“NOTE. At this place the entry in the diary ceases to be legible. . . . On the next page of the Diary, another entry appears. It is in a man’s handwriting . . .” (343). The astute reader, by now fully able to recognize his diction, need not wait for Count Fosco’s signature. His intruding comments offer a sinister picture of the now occluded future. “I breathe my wishes for her recovery. I condole with her on the inevitable failure of every plan that she has formed for her sister’s benefit . . . Fosco” (344).

On January 28, 1860, readers would have received the tenth installment of the serialization which opens with Marian’s diary. Tension would have begun to build at that point in time. However, it can be said that because of the ongoing sense of the entries, the crisis does not make itself overt until Fosco’s violation of the diary. This would have occurred in the 22nd installment of the serialization which was published on April 21, 1860. The revelation that Marian never left Blackwater ends the 25th installment on May 12, 1860. For almost five months, but most especially during this aforementioned three-week period, the reader would have been left in doubt as to whether Marian spoke through her diary by choice or by necessity—that is, whether she was still available to speak at all. As the 25th installment ends, Marian is presumably alive, although the Victorian reader would still have had to endure a painful anticipation before another installment verified this. In effect, the reader would have lived through a very convincing simulacrum of what the characters in the book were living through.

In general, the narrative constitutes a *history* in which the compilation of information by Hartright causes most of the “documents” to be a past-tense

discussion of events from a time—the time of their creation *for* Hartright—which is actually forward of the time in which the mystery would have reached its climax. Thus the reader is assured that the story as a whole is one read through a retrospective filter which was constructed only after some conclusion (albeit one unknown to the reader) had been reached. Collins knew that his Victorian readers more than anything desired a sense of closure. They were searching for the meaning this would provide for their own lives—a reinforcement of the concepts of both providence and destiny. However, as Lonoff points out to us, Collins also wanted to write a suspenseful novel that would be more popular and profitable for its manipulation of his readers' anxieties. He does this most effectively through the *discourse* of Marian's diary by forcing the reader into a simulation of what it would have been like to live out the events in the story in the present tense of their happening, thereby exploiting their fears that some other force, such as chance or malign human intent, might prevail if not in the narrative as a whole, then in the fate of one of its most appealing characters.¹¹ However, as Cohn points out, no matter how immediate the temporal sensation of a diary might be, it cannot achieve the zero temporality she associates with simultaneous narration. The reader always knows that the diary is a document completed up to a certain point before the reader reads it. Despite Collins's skill in exploiting present-tense narration in order to enhance suspense and strengthen his narrative authority, his approach is nonetheless conventional. The same is not true of Dickens.

Dickens makes extended use of present-tense narration in three of his mature novels—*Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.¹² In *Bleak House* the third-person narrative voice speaks in the present tense with a Jeremiah-like authority, which contrasts with Esther Summer-son's humble and subjective first-person, past-tense narration. The third-person narrative voice's chapters are more panoramic than dramatic. They pass judgment and summarize actions. They address large issues concerning society. Now and then they become intensely dramatic, but often still remain without dialogue. The best example is the presentation of the events leading up to and following Krook's extinction by spontaneous combustion. In *Our Mutual Friend* there is no obvious division of narrative voices. The whole text is narrated in the third person. But now and then a chapter is narrated in the present tense. These present-tense chapters generally are concerned with public or quasi-public events, such as the activities of Veneering and his associates surrounding his decision to run for Parliament. These chapters consist almost entirely of panoramic presentation. But Dickens's use of the present tense in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is an advance in technique upon these two employments of the tense.

Like Collins, Dickens played upon his readers' anxieties about an uncertain future, while nonetheless endorsing a providential certainty about the nature of human existence, and in doing so both thrilled and entertained them. In *Bleak House* the subjective narrative of Esther Summerson is narrated in traditional past tense of *history*, but surprisingly the third-person narrator records events in the present tense in a way that recalls Carlyle's experiments in historical writing.¹³ The third-person narrator approximates the mode of cinema, where the camera, with all of its real-time immediacy, can show us surfaces in great detail, but makes few attempts to penetrate them. *Bleak House* forces *history* and *discourse* to inhabit a single text, leaving the reader to puzzle out the significance of the suspense and satisfaction created by this abutment. Ironically, it is Esther's "autobiographical" narrative that employs the presumably nonautobiographical and nonsubjective past-tense mode of history, and the objective, historically oriented third-person narrator who employs the subjective mode of discourse. *Our Mutual Friend* complicates this conjunction of planes of utterance by removing the "simplification" of having two distinct narrators. Now the same narrative voice shifts from the manner of history to that of discourse, from past-tense omniscience to present-tense cinematic exploration of surfaces. But in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the device is taken to a new level because now one narrative voice slides between history and discourse, but the present-tense chapters permit a transcending of surfaces, so that internal conditions can be revealed, as in cinema voice-over, symbolism, fade-ins to mental states, and so forth can reveal unexpressed states of mental action, such as dreams and desires.¹⁴ Dickens has finally established his past-tense narrative as history and his present-tense narrative as discourse, according to Benveniste's distinction, but he has done so in a single narrative in which the two modes continually, but covertly, manifest their mutual incompatibility.¹⁵

Another problem that surfaces when contrasting the use of present-tense narration in *Bleak House* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is that of focalization, the means by which the events of a narrative are perceived. There is still no certain agreement about how to define focalization, but for my purposes here I shall define it as the mediating vantage point from which events in the narrative are seen. Mieke Bal offers one of the broader explanations. "When focalization lies with one character which participates in the fabula as an actor, we could refer to *internal* focalization. We can then indicate by means of the term external focalization that an anonymous agent, situated outside the fabula is functioning as focalizer" (105).¹⁶ Many narratologists, following Gérard Genette, argue that the focalizer must be a figure in the fabula, not a nondiegetic voice.¹⁷

In *Bleak House* there are essentially no focalizing characters in the

present-tense narration, but the ideological position of the narrating voice located outside the fabula is so apparent that that voice occasionally cannot help but blurt out his position, as in this notorious example just after Jo the crossing sweeper has died.

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (649)¹⁸

Something more complicated is happening in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Like *Bleak House*, *Drood* begins in the present tense. The first character introduced is John Jasper in an opium den. “Shaking from head to foot, the man whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together, at length rises, supports his trembling frame upon his arms, and looks around. He is in the meanest and closest of small rooms” (1). But where is the narrator? Not only is he in the present tense, but he is also either in Jasper’s head or else on some other spatial and temporal plane—the passage opens with a description of a cathedral and dissolves into fragmented references to a Sultan, Turkish robbers, and a royal procession complete with ten thousand scimitars and white elephants! The narrator and the narrative sustain this strange construction of temporality until the sixth and seventh chapters, when the narrative shifts temporarily to past tense.¹⁹ This first present-tense narration’s focalization is blurred from the outset. The narrator is capable of knowing what the dreaming John Jasper sees. Are we to understand that Jasper is the focalizer here even as he dreams? I think not. His vision is mediated through the narrator and I am prepared to call that focalization. But the focalization does not rest there. When Jasper comes to consciousness it shifts to him as he looks on with disgust at Princess Puffer and a drugged lascar. Moreover, in the last pages of the novel, focalization hovers between the narrator and Datchery. Dickens, in this novel, seems to be treating focalization as a version of free indirect discourse, where boundaries of definition can also blur and dissolve quickly. The present-tense narrator of *Bleak House* was a remote surveyor of surfaces. By contrast the narrative voice of *Drood* is so intimate and invasive that it can describe the images in dreams and can know what the characters think. In fact, in some of these instances it appears as though the simultaneous narration is compromised and that the narrator is providing an account of events that have already transpired, most notably in the chapter that describes events the night before Drood’s disappearance. Here is an example:

Edwin Drood passes a solitary day. Something of deeper moment than he had thought has gone out of his life, and in the silence of his own chamber he wept for it last night. Though the image of Miss Landless still hovers in the background of his mind, the pretty little affectionate creature, so much firmer and wiser than he had supposed, occupies its stronghold. (124)

A similar passage describes Jasper's day.

John Jasper passes a more agreeable and cheerful day than either of his guests. Having no music-lessons to give in the holiday season, his time is his own, but for the Cathedral services. He is early among the shopkeepers, ordering little table luxuries that his nephew likes. His nephew will not be with him long, he tells his provision-dealers, and so must be petted and made much of. (127–28)

I would argue that this is not historical present—the present-tense narration of events already past—but a compacted version of simultaneous narration. It resembles the technique Dickens used in *David Copperfield* where David provides condensed accounts of his early history in present-tense chapters he calls retrospects. These are historical present accounts. But the condensed descriptions of Drood's and Jasper's days are condensed within the present-tense narration of ongoing experience, a characteristic emphasized by the parallel presentation (“Edwin Drood passes . . .” “John Jasper passes . . .”).

I am suggesting that Dickens was making some remarkable advances in narrative craft and that an examination of his use of present-tense narration is one avenue through which to disclose them. However, whereas modern novelists have carried such experiments a long way for new purposes, Dickens remained committed to authorial control. He did this to a great extent in *Drood* by dwelling upon what is not known.

While a number of Dickens's novels deal with mystery as a crime that must be solved or as the unknowable destiny that awaits each character, only one of his works—as its title suggests—specifically sets out to be a suspense novel: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Like his earlier work, this book also poses questions of how much control characters have over their own lives. Rosa Bud and Edwin Drood, for example, feel themselves trapped in an arranged betrothal that has determined the course of their futures in a way that they themselves might not have arranged those tomorrows. And John Jasper feels himself trapped in what to him is the trivial existence of a cathedral choir director. Present-tense narration, more specifically simultaneous narration, enhances this sense of entrapment at the same time that it increases immediacy. It emphasizes contingency. But this is a psychological

contingency, not the material contingency of realism. It is as though Dickens is consciously substituting the one for the other to emphasize the fabular/imaginative quality over any resemblance it has to realism.

The absence of a frame complicates and enriches *Drood*. As with the third-person narrators of *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, there is no suggestion that the narrator exists within the story itself, despite his present-tense discourse.²⁰ There is also no reference that would allow us to read *Drood* as a memoir, for example, a text that can plausibly use the present tense to re-create past incidents. Instead, the reader is caught up in the moment as it actually occurs and experiences the events in the same temporality as do the characters. Of course, the reader cannot actually ever get past the fact that he or she is situated elsewhere, in the study or on the couch *reading* the story instead of living the events. But it is a compliment to Dickens's talent that the reader's reality rarely interferes with the development of the story and that no ruptures occur in the narrative which would jolt the reader back to the fact that it is highly implausible that someone would have been able to follow along with *all* of the events *as* they actually happened. Indeed, the shifts back to past tense emphasize the unusualness of the present-tense chapters. Dickens is calling attention to their transgressive nature. Working ostensibly toward a "mystery" narrative, Dickens has created an even deeper level of suspense in his creation of a third-person narrator who is able to pass judgment on characters and their actions, but who is never put into the position of seeming to withhold information from the reader. There is nothing in Dickens's text from which the reader can infer that the narrator holds the secret of the mystery; the reader simply accepts that he or she will follow the present-tense description of events until the conclusion (or, as should have been the case, the solution). Strikingly, the present-tense narration, with its blindness of the future, dominates the past-tense narration, which, because it is in the past tense and hence presumably subsequent to events it describes, should overwhelm the present-tense narration through its supposed access to the outcome of events. That it does not is apparent in the opaqueness of *Drood's* plot. No one has been able satisfactorily to finish Dickens's story. Dickens, an already astute judge of his audience's desire for social justice and personal security, has tapped into what would have been one of his readers' greatest fears: that life is a mystery enshrouding each individual and that no single clue exists which can lift that mantle and reveal the future.

Although the present-tense sections of *Drood* play upon the reader's anxiety by withholding any information about what is to come, they can nonetheless create an atmosphere of mystery and even dread. A relatively innocuous example occurs when John Jasper looks in upon his sleeping

nephew, Edwin Drood. “His nephew lies asleep, calm and untroubled. John Jasper stands looking down upon him, his unlighted pipe in his hand, for some time, with a fixed and deep attention. Then, hushing his footsteps, he passes to his own room, lights his pipe, and delivers himself to the Spectres it invokes at midnight” (38). The apprehension experienced in reading this passage comes not only from previous knowledge of Jasper, but, even more deliberately, from the sense that nobody, not even the narrator, truly knows what is lurking and lying in wait and, thus, everyone who ventures into that next moment known as the future is vulnerable. By intimating that signs do exist, sometimes in the form of heavy thunderclouds and other times in the cast of a sunny day, Dickens is toying with his readers’ desperate desire to read their own personal and cultural climate. Perhaps Dickens is directly addressing this desire when he describes, in a third-person section of the novel, Mr. Grewgious’s meditation upon the heavens.

[H]is gaze wandered from the windows to the stars, as if he would have read in them something that was hidden from him. Many of us would, if we could; but none of us so much as know our letters in the stars yet—or seem likely to do it, in this state of existence—and few languages can be read until their alphabets are mastered. (160)

Expounding upon the concepts of destiny and providence is one of the ways in which Dickens is able to create the sense that there is “something-about-to-happen” without having to allude directly to the event itself. Were Dickens to do this, were he to allow his present-tense narrator to know things before they happen, Dickens would be breaking the narrator’s temporal boundaries. One of the few theorists to deal with the present tense in narration is Gary Saul Morson. He writes of the professional requirements of a sportscaster that “in the temporality of his narration, there cannot be foreshadowing. On the contrary everything in his voice is oriented toward the present and the *unknown* future” (177, emphasis added). Christian Paul Casparis calls such activities as sports announcing “current report” and relates this category of present-tense usage to what he calls the historical present by its inability to know the causal framework of the event in progress; the historical present narrative similarly manifests “a conscious or unconscious indifference to the causal linking of events” (151).

Past-tense narration can be mute about the future. It can forego prolepsis and limit itself to the events as they transpire, moving as close to sheer story (the chronological order of events) as possible, and avoiding the maneuvers of plot (the rearrangements of and refinements upon story). It can, in short, approach the condition of historical-present narration. It is even possible

for present-tense narration to make use of prolepsis. That the narration is in the present tense does not mean that the future is not fully known to the narrator. An example of this possibility within Dickens's own work is *David Copperfield*, where the present-tense retrospective chapters occur within David's autobiography of which he has complete knowledge. What is to prevent the narrator from writing something like this? "David sits at the window, watching travelers pass in the street. The day will come when he too will be one of those travelers. But now his wondering gaze rests upon a parade of strangers." This is present-tense narration resembling historical-present narration. Such a liberty would presumably violate the conventions of simultaneous narration, the method, I am arguing, of *Drood*.

What is striking about *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is that both present- and past-tense chapters withhold knowledge of the future. It is the muteness about the future in the past-tense chapters that enhances a similar muteness in the present-tense chapters. The inability or refusal of Dickens's narrator to claim an already complete knowledge of the story would have disturbed a nineteenth-century reader more perhaps than grisly hints of horrors to come. The opaqueness of the future, rather than specific references to forthcoming adventures, would have unnerved the reader. It is the opposite effect to that created by the use of prolepsis, when a narrator anticipates an event to come, especially an unpleasant or even fatal event, as when a narrator says, "If only he had known at that moment what was to occur the very next day." This disclosure of a future event can create suspense and anxiety in a reader, but it is a different order of suspense from the blank future of present-tense simultaneous narration.

One of the ways in which Morson differentiates between "sports time" and a novel is his claim that a reader can always close a book, read its last page, or perhaps read an introduction that explains the plot. He writes, "the outcome has in a sense already happened . . . rather than [being] of real contingency in our own present" (174).²¹ Thus, no matter how mysterious or threatening the circumstances might appear, there is always the underlying suggestion that it is all already over, already done, and that nothing in the reading of the narrative can happen to change the ending of the story. Most readers have probably sensed an impending resolution, even when narrative events appear at their most tangled, simply because there is a diminishing number of pages separating them from where they are in the story and the last page of the book. When it becomes obvious that there is only one chapter or one page left, even the least savvy of readers can see that the finale draws closer and that the circumstances of the story must be resolved. Thus, by the sheer passing of turned pages, an adventure that began with an infinite number of possibilities must at last come down to only one—the end. How-

ever, because both Collins and Dickens first published their work in serial form, it is arguable that for their audiences there would have been a greater sense of an open ending. Since it would have been easily recognized that both authors alluded to current events, readers would have been aware that the stories were being written *even as they read*.²² This would have undermined the reader's sense that the characters' futures were foretold—that the events were long over—and would have intensified the readers' anxiety as to what the next installment of the characters' lives might mean for them. Through the medium of serial publication, which would have reinforced the effects of the present-tense narration, a feeling of contingency would have been more firmly established in the text. Again, this would have mimicked the same tension that confronted readers in their anxieties over their personal lives and the future generally. Who could know what tomorrow might bring?

It is with regard to the very human desire to know the ends of our own stories that Kermode gives new meaning to the concept of literacy. "The world is our beloved codex . . . we do, living as reading, like to think of it as a place where we can travel back and forth at will, divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy . . . this is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world—as if it were a structured narrative" (145). Victorian readers would have found that any alterations in the conventions of the novel, such as the insertion of a present-tense narration that disallows a foretold future, would have been simply one more way in which the author could force them to acknowledge their inability to read or write the future. Collins and Dickens, in their different ways, made sure that readers could not read their texts in the old familiar way—with the comfort of past-tense temporality and the reassurances of an omniscient narrator. Instead, both authors insisted that their readers confront the characters' situations as if they were themselves living in, if not the same circumstance, at least the same temporality. And by interrupting the traditional *history* narrative with the real-time impression of *discourse*, they allowed for a further examination of the questions of providence and destiny—not simply as narrative constructions, but as actual forces in the working out of events. By withholding any hints of the future in their present-tense narrations, thereby increasing their audiences' anxieties about it, they strengthened their own command over it, thus conferring on themselves the power of providential or fateful control that the present-tense itself seemed to deny. Just as promises of religion and philosophy could only be hoped for, not known for certain, so the reader of these present-tense narratives received no proleptic promises of a comfortable conclusion. But, like the scientists examining the physical relics of the past to construct a narra-

tive of human existence, they had to wait until the story was told before they could judge if it was providence, destiny, or chance that brought them to where they now stood. Ironically, it was by this, the most obviously contrived element of the narrative, the rude coupling of the supposedly discrete planes of utterance of *history* and *discourse*, that Collins and Dickens were able to make their stories that much more *real* to their readers. And it is exactly this contrivance that sets the novel outside the category of realism. The reality dealt with here is not the replication of material conditions, but the sense of mental and emotional participation under the guidance of a master.